

Stowaway

by KateMarie999

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Summary: Growing Up Haddock Story 4: In the midst of family turmoil, Hiccup and Astrid's son decides to take matters into his own hands and soon gets way more than he bargained for. Now it's up to his father to save him from a terrible fate... if Hiccup can get over some of his own issues as well. Only HTTYD and R/DoB are canon.

## 1. Anger Management

\_The time has come! For those of you who didn't know, I was planning to wait until a semi-regular reader caught up with the series due to her complaints of emotional distress when reading this series all in one go. However, due to her time constraints and the amount of people asking me when I'm going to post this, I decided to just go for it. I am pretty excited about it so I won't delay it any further.\_

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><p><strong>Chapter One: Anger Management<strong>

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><p><em>This is Berk.<em>

\_At first glance, you might think it's a peaceful community. We don't start wars for fun, we don't kill dragons, and we don't even do that much hunting. On the surface, it looks like a cheerful, safe, and interesting place to live.\_

\_But it's easy to miss what's below the surface. The thoughts and feelings we hide from the world. The anger we feel toward the ones we love and the anger at ourselves for feeling it. The hidden motivations behind the most mean spirited acts. That's what you don't see. Yet it runs rampant no matter how happy everything seems on the

outside.\_

\_Unfortunately, if enough goes on below the surface, it's inevitably going to come into view. And sometimes when it goes unchecked, it's too late to fix.\_

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><p>Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III was exhausted. Sleep was something that was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. And it always seemed to come at the worst moments.<p>

"Up! Get up!"

The piercing voice above his head could only belong to his wife. Astrid Hofferson Haddock wasn't even trying to mask the sounds she was making. It could not be morning already. Hadn't he just fallen asleep? Was she just out to torture him? He groaned and rolled over, putting his pillow over his head.

"What are you... ugh!" Astrid stomped forward and ripped the covers off his back. "I said get up!"

"Mmmmm no." Hiccup moaned, curling up so that his body would remain warm. "Too early."

"It is not too early! You're going to be late to your own meeting if you do not get up this instant. Gods, you're as bad as the kids!" Astrid snapped.

"I'm not getting up if you're just going to nag me all morning." Hiccup retorted, stubbornly clinging to his pillow. "Will you just relax?"

"No, I will not relax! You're a grown man! Act like it!" Astrid smacked him with the blanket she had just confiscated.

"Maybe if you start acting like a lady..."

"You did not just say that!"

"Yeah, I think I did!"

Astrid snarled and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Hiccup wished he could take it as a sign that he had won the argument but he knew from experience that it was only just beginning. And now he was too busy stewing in his anger to go back to sleep.

Hiccup had been chief of the Hooligan tribe for just over two years. And in those two years, he had managed to delegate a lot of tasks among his people so that he wouldn't have too much on his plate each day. Unfortunately for him, breaking up fights was one of the duties he was saddled with thanks to his extensive experience in running the Academy. It also happened to be his most frequent duty. It seemed like he had prevented his people from killing each other eight or nine times a day. And that was a conservative estimate that certainly didn't include the amount of fighting going on under his roof.

Now that he thought about it, the irony of what he was about to do

that morning hit him. Fed up with the amount of fights he now had to break up, he had decided to start teaching anger management classes to his fellow Hooligans. It was about time someone taught them how to deal with their own disagreements instead of constantly going to get him. Maybe he'd have time to deal with his own family's issues instead of dealing with everyone in the tribe's.

He waited a few seconds before rolling out of bed and slowly getting dressed. No flight suit today. He had a feeling that the class would last a long time. Perhaps it would be a good idea to wear some armor just in case. As he pulled on a second pair of pants, this one made of more sturdy material that would hopefully protect his stump, he heard loud banging from the hallway.

"Wake up!" Astrid bellowed, sounding even more irritated than before. "Breakfast is in ten minutes and if you are not out of bed and dressed by that time, you can just go hungry."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. Time for the daily struggle to begin. He knew exactly what was going to happen. First, his daughter would technically follow the rules (though somehow manage to tick her mother off anyway) and he would have to wait until Astrid had cooled off a bit to stop her from letting the girl starve. Meanwhile, one of his children would manage to irritate the other and the first of many screaming matches would commence.

This, he reasoned, was exactly why he was teaching his peers how to control their anger. He was far too busy preventing his children from killing each other.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself before facing the inevitable shouting, screaming, and fighting, he walked out of the master bedroom and gently knocked on his daughter's door.

"Addie, honey, just do as your mother says and maybe she won't yell at us." he said through the wood.

"She always yells at us." the girl replied sleepily.

Hiccup sighed. "I know. But at least try this morning, okay?"

The door opened to reveal Adrianna Miracle Haddock, her hair disheveled and her clothes wrinkled and put on at an odd angle. Her bright green eyes were half hidden by her drooping eyelids and she still had flecks of dried drool on her cheek. Hiccup thought he had a beautiful little girl but it took a while for everyone else to see that.

"Addie, come on. You can't go downstairs looking like that." the young father got to work smoothing out his daughter's shirt and tugging at half of her skirt so that it would be even instead of completely lopsided. He licked his thumb and wiped off the drool from her cheek. "For once, let's actually look like we didn't roll out of bed five minutes ago."

"But I did roll out of bed five minutes ago." Adrianna retorted, looking distinctly grumpy.

"Yes but let's pretend you didn't." Hiccup replied without missing a beat. "Where is your hairbrush?"

"I think I saw a hairbrush back there." Adrianna pointed to a corner of her incredibly messy room.

Hiccup strode forward. "You're going to have to be more specific." he said, digging through the pile of clothes in the corner. "Are these clean?"

"I don't remember." Adrianna shrugged. "There it is." she pointed to the hairbrush embedded in a wad of socks.

Hiccup picked it up and immediately got to work on his daughter's tangled locks. He had no idea how her hair always managed to look so terrible each morning when she looked just fine before bed. Once he had finally managed to remove the worst of the knots, Astrid had decided that they'd waited long enough.

"Breakfast is ready and if you don't come downstairs this instant, you're not getting any!" she yelled up the stairs.

"Better go." Hiccup nudged his daughter forward.

The girl scowled but led her father down the stairs and into the main room. Astrid had only set two plates at the table. This wasn't altogether surprising since Adrianna was almost always late and Hiccup would run out of the house without breakfast most days (partially because he had a lot of work to do but mostly to avoid her glaring at him from across the table).

"Well..." Astrid took one look at Adrianna and was suddenly struck with the inability to criticize anything. She looked up at Hiccup and felt the same. "There's a nice change of pace."

"Thank you for the confidence boost." Hiccup deadpanned, picking up two plates from the open cupboard.

Astrid glared at him but didn't say a word as she sat down in front of the bread and porridge. Without the usual morning fussing about Adrianna's appearance, she found herself at a loss for words. In fact, the meal was uncomfortably quiet until a very excited voice shattered the silence.

"I could do six chin-ups this morning!" Fearless Finn Haddock burst out like he had been waiting for the best opportunity to share this information. "Yesterday I could only do five but I'm doing better now. I have muscles, see?" he flexed his arm.

"That's great, buddy." Hiccup said, only glancing upward at his son.

"How many can you do, dad?" Finn asked, his spoon suspended over his porridge and his blue eyes fixed on his father's forehead.

"I don't know. I guess I'll have to give it a try sometime." Hiccup gave the boy a half smile.

"Well I was practicing yesterday and I could do a whole bunch of them." Astrid shot her husband a look before turning to her son. "When you can do ten, we can go on a flight. What do you think?"

Finn's eyes widened. "Ten?"

"Ten. You've got to prove your strength as a Viking warrior." Astrid nudged the boy's shoulder. "That goes for you too, Anna."

Adrianna sighed. "I don't think I can."

"You haven't tried. Come on, we can practice after the meeting." Astrid coaxed. "I bet you can do at least two."

"I don't want to." Adrianna mumbled, her eyes fixed on her own porridge.

"It's good exercise, Anna. Just for half an hour." Astrid wheedled, her eyes fixed on the top of her daughter's head which, was shaking back and forth in response. "Half an hour and then we'll be done. It'll be over before you know it."

"She doesn't want to, Astrid." Hiccup said in a low voice.

"Well sometimes kids have to do stuff they don't want to do. It's good for her." Astrid's eyes flitted to her husband, who didn't look up.

"Yeah when it's important. They're just chin-ups. She gets plenty of exercise running around outside." Hiccup finally met her gaze and narrowed his eyes slightly.

Astrid pursed her lips, unwilling to argue with her husband in front of her children. The house became extremely quiet again.

Hiccup sighed and stared into his food much like the rest of his family. Tensions in the Haddock house had been building for several weeks. Astrid had become steadily more snippy with him and he wasn't altogether certain why. He had tried to ask her what was wrong but she would shake her head and put off the conversation. He had a feeling that it would lead to a fight and he wasn't eager to start one.

Of course, his marital problems weren't the only conflicts in the house. For the last two years, Astrid had gotten to work teaching her children how to read. Finn had mastered it within a year but Adrianna had a strange aversion to her studies and no amount of prodding from Astrid could get her to focus. At age seven, she still couldn't read even the most basic words. What Hiccup didn't know was that Astrid specifically timed her lessons so that he wouldn't be in the house. These lessons were more like screaming matches that often ended with Adrianna in tears.

But things were beginning to come to an unavoidable boiling point now that three quarters of the family took issue with each other. Finn, who was beginning to feel like a bit of an outsider, had taken to spending as much time away from the house as he could when everyone was home. So far, there hadn't been a blowup. But it was only a matter of time. Hiccup hoped that the anger management class he was going to attempt to teach would help his family deal with their own issues as well. And perhaps he could have a civilized conversation with his wife. It was worth a shot.

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><p>Since becoming chief, Hiccup had learned quite a few little tricks when it came to dealing with people. For example, being calm in a crisis was definitely an underrated skill. He also learned that no amount of pleading would get anyone to listen to him so he had to be firm and unwavering in his convictions. But the trick he most commonly used was one he learned from a singer to prevent his throat from going hoarse after a day of shouting so that everyone could hear him, whether it was over two fighting children or a room full of whispering Vikings. In order to get the most volume and avoid straining his voice, he learned to breathe with his diaphragm before speaking. The first time he had done this, he had caught himself off guard with the sound bursting from his throat but he had since learned how to use it to his advantage.<p>

Of course, proper breathing techniques could only get him so far. And an entire arena full of grumpy Vikings of all ages was already going to be hard enough. Trying to talk over them would be next to impossible. Hiccup thought irritably that perhaps he should have considered this before insisting that everyone attend.

"Umm... guys!" he called as loudly as he could. "Can you all just settle down? We could get this over a lot faster if... guys... everyone... hey!" he bounced a bit as he attempted to make himself look a bit taller but it was to no avail. "Come on! Just a few minutes of your-"

"SHUT UP!" Ruffnut hollered quite suddenly.

A hush fell over the crowd. Hiccup beamed at her.

"Thank you, Ruff. So umm... right!" the Hooligan chief straightened up and began to pace in front of the chalkboard he used at the academy, fiddling with fresh chalk in his left hand. "As you know, there are a lot of disagreements on Berk. Daily, actually. More like every few hours." he cleared his throat and licked his lips, beginning to regret not having rehearsed his speech the night before. "But that's all going to change. With a few tips on anger management, you'll be able to handle your own disputes."

Astrid turned her derisive laugh into a coughing fit. Unabashed, Hiccup continued.

"So the first thing I was thinking about teaching you all is proper breathing techniques." he announced, ceasing his pacing and standing in front of the crowd.

"We're breathing wrong? I didn't know there was a wrong way to breathe!" Tuffnut called from toward the back of the arena.

"Not what I meant. I mean you need to breathe... different... when you're upset. Here, stand up straight, shoulders back." there were loud scraping noises as his people reluctantly rose from their seats. "Now take a deep breath, hold it, and then release."

"This is stupid." said Snotlout rather loudly rather than actually obey. "How will we ever use this in a conflict?"

"Easy! We could breathe in and blow our opponent over! Is that what

you're going to teach us?" Ruffnut leaned forward a bit, suddenly eager.

"No! That's not... no, come on." Hiccup rolled his eyes. "This is about managing your anger so you can channel it constructively and not need me to come break up fights."

"Wait! You mean you're not teaching us how to fight with each other?" Tuffnut looked scandalized.

"Of course not, why would I teach you that? Your fighting is why I'm here! It's about time someone put a stop to it!" Hiccup sighed, his breathing techniques forgotten.

The crowd was beginning to murmur amongst themselves. Apparently Hiccup hadn't explained what he meant by anger management classes in a clear enough fashion. He growled in frustration. Two years as chief and he still made incredibly stupid mistakes. However, this now meant he had two years of experience talking himself out of embarrassing situations.

"All right, I can see there's been a bit of a miscommunication!" he called over the muttering, which was steadily rising in volume. "I'm teaching you all how to manage your anger so that when you are in conflict, you can solve it yourselves. This will be really helpful in the long run and hopefully prevent a lot of avoidable accidents and injuries."

At this point, no one was paying attention to their chief. Finn and Helga Ingeman, who had been poking each other since the start of the class, had started to argue in hushed tones. Inga Jorgenson and Gunnar Ingeman were having a similar dispute a few rows back. Astrid leaned back and decided to enjoy watching her husband struggle as more and more altercations were beginning to take place all over the arena.

"Now if you could just settle down, I could teach you how to- Finn, for the love of Thor, do not push Helga, she's a lot smaller than you- teach you how to control your- Mulch, Bucket, stop hitting each other- control your anger." Hiccup was beginning to gesture wildly in a vain attempt to restore control. "So after you take your- Ruff, Tuff, this is not a war meeting, put down the daggers- your deep breaths, just tell yourself- Finn, let go of Edgar's shirt- tell yourself to relax and... and stop fuming and... take it... take it..." Hiccup put his head in his hands, balling his fists so tightly that his fingernails came dangerously close to cutting into his palms. "OH FORGET IT!" he suddenly bellowed.

The jarring, unrestrained shout from their leader hushed the Hooligans in a second but Hiccup didn't notice this. Astrid smirked. Here came the show.

"You know what? Fine! Just freak out and hit each other with your maces and axes and whatever else you find lying around because I'm done! I have better things to do than to come and solve every one of your problems!" he threw the chalk down, causing it to snap in half. "I don't know how my dad did it! Why is it\_ my\_ job to make you act like civilized human beings? Well you know what? I'm not doing it anymore!" he was running his fingers through his hair, grabbing clumps of it and pulling so hard he could feel the individual hairs

snapping. "I quit! When you need me for an actual chiefly duty that doesn't involve nearly being beaten over the head ten times a day, come and find me!"

With that, he stomped out of the arena, his metal foot making a very loud noise every other step. Toothless, who was waiting outside, cooed in concern but Hiccup shook his head. He had long since learned that flying while angry was something he would do well to avoid when possible. The Night Fury followed his livid rider away from the crowd. Had Hiccup stopped his ragged breathing for even a second, he might have noticed a silence coming from the arena as everyone watched him stomp away until he was out of sight.

For a moment, all was calm and quiet. Astrid looked around in amusement at her fellow Hooligans, most of whom had never seen their chief throw a fit like that. A few months ago, Hiccup might have had a bit more patience before snapping but she had noticed that his tolerance was being stripped away little by little over the last few weeks. She hoped no one would try to talk to her about it.

Finally, Gobber stepped forward to the now vacated spot at the front of the crowd. "You know, Hiccup has a point." he admitted with a shrug. "Perhaps we would all benefit from learning how to \_not\_ attack each other when conflicts arise."

There was a murmur of assent. Ironically, now that the Hooligans had seen firsthand how ridiculous fits of anger looked to other people, they were beginning to see the point in the lesson.

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><p>"Well that was just great. Real leadership skills there." Astrid remarked sardonically as she walked into the Haddock home, slamming the door behind her.<p>

Hiccup hummed in an irritated sort of way but did not respond. He had spent a good portion of the morning catching up on a few inventing projects he had been putting off. His charcoal scraped against the parchment as he wrote out some designs for even better and sturdier catapults to replace the ones that had broken. Astrid's interruption was not appreciated.

"Oh okay. Don't bother you. Got it." Astrid rolled her eyes and stomped up the stairs, intending to take a short nap before going back out into the town square. She had spent the morning covering for her husband and thought it was well deserved.

How had Hiccup's life become so full of conflict? A year ago, everything had been fine. His kids were happy, his wife was happy, his dragon was happy and he... well he was becoming a very good actor. But things change when anyone carries around guilt long enough. Even the biggest of smiles can only hide the darkness inside so much. But hadn't he done his best to move on? Hadn't he spent countless nights convincing himself that he had made the right choice?

No, he thought irritably. He had done the right thing. It was only natural to feel guilty. It was Astrid who was being unreasonable, who was becoming grouchy and mean spirited these days. And his children were getting older. Of course their polar opposite personalities



would cause more conflict now that they were developing. Surely it wasn't his fault that everything had gone so badly so fast. He was doing the best he could.

He shook his head to clear his mind of his doubts and went back to working on his designs. He would deal with it another day.

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><p><em>I'm so sorry I made you all wait for that! This chapter took over a week to write because of laziness and a bit of writer's block. I really hope this chapter piques your interest!<em>

Also, since I have started planning a lot of things far in advance, loose ends that start up in this story may not be tied up until a later installment. I say this because I've already laid the groundwork for Story 5. Assuming you all like this one, I can't wait to write it too! But first things first.\_

Special thanks to **\*\*amyboomerang\*\*** for basically coming up with the majority of the story. Also to **\*\*Fritz96\*\*** for some assistance as well. To **\*\*httydfan1991\*\*** for an idea that turned into a whole subplot. To **\*\*nedandchuck\*\*** for the cover art. And finally to **\*\*EmmerzK\*\*** for being a beta and a bestie and for being really stubborn and refusing to stop talking to me despite numerous setbacks. I'm starting to feel like I have a huge team of people behind this series and I'm deeply thankful for all of them.\_

Don't forget to review!\_

~KateMarie999\_

## 2. The Stampede

Thank you for your kind words! I'm so happy to be back. Two weeks is far too long to wait, my lovelies! A section of this chapter was originally written as a one-shot from Finn's POV (at age 18 or so). I sent it to a few people who thought it was really funny so I'll post it with the extras section at the very end of this story. However, if you want to read it now, just send me a PM or say it as part of your review and I'll send it to you.\_

To clarify, Astrid is **\*\*not\*\*** pregnant. I had someone ask if she was and I realized that the last chapter could possibly indicate something to that effect. There will be **\*\*no more\*\*** Hiccstrid babies. I have very strong reasons which I'll tell anyone who asks. Too much to write out in this already long author's note.\_

Also, just so you know, this chapter is almost entirely recycled Fearless Fables material and ideas (it works a lot better here but it's still written in the witty format). If you like the humor in this, you should definitely check it out!\_ Anyway, enjoy!\_

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><p><strong>Chapter Two: The Stampede<strong>

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><p>Any self respecting seven-year-old boy will tell you that he's not afraid of anything. Finn took his first name very seriously and strived to emulate it in any way possible. He didn't show weakness. He didn't cry and he certainly didn't need his parents to get him out of trouble. He could handle anything life threw his way from his broken ankle the previous year to the arguing he pretended he couldn't hear each night before he went to bed.<p>

Two days after the disastrous anger management class, Finn found himself in yet another conflict, this time with his mother.

"Out!" Astrid shrieked, pushing her small son out of the house with gusto. "If you're going to make messes, you're going to stay \_outside\_ for the rest of the day!"

The door slammed, making the boy jump slightly. Finn scowled at the house, his heart pounding and his chest filled with righteous anger. How \_dare\_ she kick him out for this! How \_dare\_ she refuse to listen to him! He was shaking with fury, walking down the hill to the village with his hands in his pockets, angrily kicking small stones out of the way.

The Hooligans out in the village square kept their distance from the livid boy; Finn had definitely inherited his mother's temper and no one felt safe setting him off, even with a friendly comment. However, just as everyone was intentionally giving the boy a wide berth, a screaming voice pierced the air.

"OUT!" Heather screamed, shoving her husband out the door with surprising strength for a woman carrying a toddler. "Get out of this house right now! I never want to see you again!"

Snotlout stared at his wife, his mouth bobbing up and down like a fish before he finally found his voice. "I was just sharpening my axe..."

"Oh really? Well why don't you take your precious axe? After all you've done to me, you might as well just keep it!" an axe came whizzing out of the door, coming very close to chopping the man in half.

"Heather... honey..." Snotlout whimpered, getting a last look at his wife before she slammed the door in his face. He gritted his teeth. "\_Five... more... days...\_"

Finn, who had been watching the scene unfold with mild fascination, spoke up. "Five more days til what?"

"Until she starts acting like herself again." Snotlout replied, still glaring at the door. "Always the last day of the month; I might as well stay away from the house until it's over." he muttered furiously.

"Why was she so upset? Get yourself a lady friend?" an older Hooligan man asked, winking at Snotlout.

"What? No! No I would never-"

"What's a lady friend?"

Both men looked down at Finn as if they had only just noticed he was standing there. Snotlout's face went beet red in half a second as the man who had asked took off in the opposite direction. Finn's eyes were wide with innocent curiosity. And Snotlout wasn't about to smash that innocence to bits. Not today, anyway.

"It's a lady who is friends with a man." he replied, picking up his axe and swinging it over his shoulder in an attempt to distract the boy.

It didn't. "So... is Anna Erick's lady friend?"

Snotlout wasn't sure whether to let out the bubble of laughter rising in his chest at the innocent question. He decided to shove it down. "No, he's not... only men have lady friends."

"Oh." Finn said, furrowing his eyebrows for a second as he processed this information. "Okay then."

Snotlout was relieved that this very awkward conversation seemed to come to a close. For about a second. Then he took in the boy's hunched shoulders, the hands in the pockets, the lips pressed tightly together. He knew this look far too well, though it was usually Astrid who maintained this posture.

"So what's the matter?" he asked, deciding that it would be better to change the subject than to allow the boy to ask any more questions about the previous topic.

"Nothing." Finn spat, kicking another rock with the toe of his boot.

Snotlout gave the boy a second glance, just enough to know that he had told him a pretty big lie. If it truly was nothing, Finn would be running around town asking lots of questions and trying to help out the large men with their work.

This gave him a sudden idea. "Want to help me chop firewood?"

Finn stared at him for a moment, eyeing the axe over his father's friend's shoulder, and nodded. Snotlout considered taking the boy's hand as they walked into the woods but he thought that Finn was a bit too old to have his hand held by anyone other than his mother. Not to mention, the boy could pack a mean punch and he had been fortunate enough to not yet be on the receiving end. He had been present when Tuffnut picked on Astrid (in a good natured way but Finn didn't quite understand it yet) and had received a fistful of the boy's wrath. No, Snotlout didn't want a similar fate.

They walked in silence until they reached a small clearing. Snotlout found a good sized tree to chop down for firewood. He enjoyed this task immensely; it gave him just enough alone time to process everything that had happened while there wasn't too much, otherwise he would get bored. Finn watched him chop the tree several times before sitting down and putting his head in his clenched fists.

Snotlout finally put down the axe. "All right, Finn, tell me what's bothering you."

"Nothing!" Finn repeated irritably.

"Yeah sure. Nothing." Snotlout rolled his eyes. "You're not a very good liar."

"Forget it." Finn mumbled, looking down at his lap.

"No, I'm not going to forget it. At least not until you tell me what's going on." Snotlout crouched down so that he was at the boy's level.

Finn shook his head. Snotlout growled in frustration for a second before he got a burst of inspiration.

"Tell me what's wrong and I'll... I'll eat this live grasshopper." he picked up the creature, who immediately tried to hop out of his hand as if it knew its fate.

Finn looked up, eyeing the bug and then looking back at Snotlout. His daddy's friend wasn't about to do something so gross (though the boy was tempted to use this bribe on someone else one day). Still, it would be fun watching Snotlout try to explain his way out of not eating the wretched thing.

"Mom kicked me out." he said, sighing deeply as if resigned to his end of the deal. "She says I made a big mess in the kitchen."

"Well did you?"

"No! Well not this time!" Finn exclaimed, waving his arms around in a way that reminded Snotlout of Hiccup. "Anna's been trying to cook and she made a huge mess and then she went out because she wanted to tell Erick and mom came home and yelled at me just 'cause I was standing there and she thought I made the mess and when I told her I didn't, she said I was lying and then threw me out!" he said all of this in one breath and had to gasp loudly the second he was finished.

"Ah." Snotlout said, a small smile on his face. "So you're upset because your mom blamed you for something your sister did." Finn nodded. "Well... bottoms up!"

Finn's mouth dropped open as he watched Snotlout open his mouth, tip his head back, and drop the grasshopper into his mouth. He gulped and looked back at the boy, who was now in awe of his father's friend. Why hadn't his father ever told him how cool Uncle Snotlout was?

"What? I told you I'd do it! You didn't think I was lying, did you?" Snotlout chuckled at the boy's awed expression.

"No... yes... I don't know." Finn shrugged. "Can I eat a grasshopper?"

Snotlout's chuckle turned into an uproarious laugh. "I think your parents might not want you to."

"My parents don't care what I do unless it makes a big mess." Finn shook his head and traced another grasshopper's movement with his eyes.

"I don't think that's true." Snotlout sat down next to the boy, deciding that now was as good a time as any for a break. He had a feeling he would be talking to his friends' son for a little while. "I think your parents are just frustrated."

"Frustrated with what? I don't make that many messes." Finn grabbed a stick and began to draw little pictures in the dirt.

"With each other mostly. And your sister. I don't know what's going on but sometimes grown-ups take their anger out on the wrong people." Snotlout patted the boy on the shoulder. "I think your mom does care about you. Actually, I know she does. And your dad is weird." Finn raised his eyebrows at this comment, making Snotlout chuckle. "Yeah he is. And I think he shows how much he cares in a different way that not everyone can understand. Except your mom and probably Anna."

"How's this going to help me?" Finn asked.

Snotlout took a moment to think about this legitimate question. "Well I think if you point out your accomplishments instead of expecting your parents to just notice them, you'd probably get a lot more attention. I did that as a kid and my dad still talks about some of the stuff I did."

"What kind of accomplishments? What did you do when you were a kid?"

"Well..." Snotlout smiled at a sudden memory that popped into his head. "When I was about eight, I think, I caught a wild boar. Best bacon I've ever had."

Finn furrowed his brows in deep thought. "Okay..." he suddenly stood up, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "I think I'm going to go now."

"You don't want to stick around and watch me cut down this tree?" Snotlout asked, picking up his axe again.

Finn shook his head. "No. I just have to go."

"Suit yourself. Let me know if you need any firewood. Your dad seems pretty busy." Snotlout chopped at the tree once more.

"I will!" Finn called, taking off into the forest.

Branches snapped underneath the boy's feet as he pelted as fast as he could toward... well, quite frankly, he didn't know where he was going. He figured he would know when he got there. He felt a tingling inside of him, the sort of tingling he got when he knew he was about to go on an adventure.

He wasn't sure how far he ran or where, exactly, he was when he finally stopped to catch his breath. He had reached a large clearing filled with grazing boars. The large, fat beasts caught his attention and he stood still, watching them traipse around and snack on the fresh grass. Any one of them would be quite a catch. The Hooligans rarely hunted for boars because it was a lot of effort for food that they could more easily get from plants and fish. Finn had never

tasted bacon but he had heard others call it "Valhalla on a plate" so he was quite eager to try it.

He crept up behind a large rock, fully aware that his vivid hair would probably be easily noticeable if any of the boars turned in his direction. He bit his lip and crouched down so that he couldn't be seen. He needed a plan. If Snotlout could catch a boar at age eight, surely he, the son of the chief, could catch one at age seven.

He heard footsteps just outside of the rock. Hooves were barely visible on the side now as one of the boars had shifted positions. Little did it know that it was in the perfect position. It wasn't as big as some of the others. Why, Finn could tackle it and stab it with the dagger he carried on his belt in seconds. Then he could carry it back to the village and everyone would talk about how Fearless Finn Haddock had been the youngest person in the whole word to kill a boar singlehandedly.

As slowly and quietly as he could, the boy sneaked up behind the smaller boar. It didn't seem to notice his presence at all. Until it was suddenly saddled with sixty extra pounds. It certainly noticed that. And with a loud, indignant squeal, the other boars were aware of its predicament.

Finn realized, too late, that boars were very fast runners. He suddenly found himself propelled forward, nearly falling off the beast's back but managing to hold onto its long hair. The boar did not seem to appreciate this and attempted to buck him off. Now all the boars were running around, all panicking and all squealing so loudly, Finn was afraid he would be deaf by the end of this adventure.

Suddenly, almost as if the boars had a secret language made entirely of ear-shattering squeals, all of the animals began to run in one direction, directly into the woods. Finn buried his face in the boar he was riding, too terrified to jump off and risk being trampled by the others behind it. He prayed that this ordeal would be over soon.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid was having a surprisingly good morning. Adrianna had come down to breakfast on time and with only a few extra knots in her hair. Hiccup had been pleasant and had even kissed her goodbye. It looked like the kind of day she would get to spend completely, blissfully alone.<p>

She and Stormfly landed after a leisurely flight during the midday while everyone was out and about doing their jobs and greeting their friends. It looked like it was going to be an ordinary and quite pleasant summer day.

Unfortunately, she had forgotten the first thing she ever learned about being a mother: surprises happen. As she walked through the square, saying hello and waving to those she passed, she noticed Stormfly suddenly tense.

"What is it, girl?" she asked, gently patting the Deadly Nadder on the snout.

All of the dragons seemed to sense that something was coming now. The Berkians looked from one dragon to the next, all confused but beginning to feel a bit on edge. Suddenly, a loud voice from close to the Great Hall pierced the air.

"EVERYBODY GET INSIDE!" shouted Hiccup, running down the hill and trying to scatter children who were playing in the dirt.

Just as Astrid was about to ask her husband what was going on, she heard what her dragon had heard before her. Faint squeals, thundering hoofbeats... a stampede was imminent and coming quite a bit faster than anyone could anticipate.

The square was clearing when the first of dozens of boars emerged from the woods. Astrid was dismayed to see a mop of red hair on top of one of the smaller boars who seemed to be leading the pack in its frenzied rampaging through town. Finn was a boistrous boy but even he had more sense than that, didn't he? She tore after her son, her dragon forgotten, and was just closing in on the boar carrying her little boy when it finally bucked him off. Her heart stopped for a moment as she watched him fly into the air, arms and legs flailing. Her body relaxed when, with a loud squelch, her son landed on a large pile of fish.

"Fearless Finn Haddock!" she bellowed as she quickened her pace toward the boy. "What in Thor's name were you thinking?"

Finn looked a bit disoriented but otherwise unhurt. And now he reeked of raw fish. He turned his gaze to his mother and looked thoroughly ashamed of himself.

"I wasn't..."

"No you certainly weren't!" Astrid grabbed him by the upper arm and yanked him up. "You are in big trouble, young man!"

Finn hung his head in shame. Mother and son turned to march home and were greeted by a truly terrifying sight. Though the dragons had stepped up and were dispersing the boars quite nicely, one of the biggest of the herd was pelting directly at Inga Jorgenson. The little girl seemed frozen in fear and, out of the corner of her eye, Astrid saw Snotlout running at full speed toward her. He would never make it to her in time.

Hiccup, however, had noticed this as well. He dived at the girl and barely managed to push her out of the way before being pitched over the boar and onto the ground. The other boars were beginning to run back into the woods so Snotlout had a clear path to his daughter.

"Thank you." he said to Hiccup, taking a moment to help his chief to his feet.

Hiccup waved a hand as a response, using his other hand to massage his ribs. Snotlout picked up his daughter and the two of them headed home. If only the happiness of this reunion could have spread to the Hooligan chief and his errant son.

Hiccup marched down the hill to where Astrid and Finn were standing. Finn tried to hide behind his mother but she wasn't about to let him

shy away.

"Fearless Finn Haddock!" Hiccup shouted. Finn winced. That was twice he had been addressed by his full name. "What possessed you to upset a pack of wild boars? Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? You could have killed someone! You almost did!"

The chief's hands flailed about as he berated his son, who was looking more and more ashamed of his actions by the second. Everyone who was still out in the square was beginning to feel extremely uncomfortable.

When Hiccup paused for breath, Astrid saw her opportunity and spoke up. "Hiccup, come on, lighten up!" she snapped. "He didn't mean to do it, did you?" she turned to her son, who shook his head.

Hiccup opened his mouth to retort when Gobber rested an arm on his shoulder. He shut it with a snap, his green eyes piercing Finn's blue ones.

"Just... just take him home. I don't want to deal with him right now." Hiccup seethed. "I have his mess to clean up."

Astrid stiffened, her mouth dropping open. "Excuse me?" she said in a low, dangerous tone. "How many messes did your father clean up? How many times did you almost burn down the village?"

Hiccup's face turned beet red. "I got punished!"

"And so will Finn!" she yelled back. "You don't have to rub it in!"

"Well take comfort!" Hiccup threw up his arms in disgust. "He's got some of me in his blood after all."

Astrid trembled with rage but decided that she would take it out on her husband later. "Come on." she said to her son, still gripping his upper arm as she marched him back to the house.

\* \* \*

><p>Adrianna was glad she lived slightly farther from the village than most houses. She and Erick had been continuing their cooking lesson when they heard loud squealing coming from the village. They ran out just in time to see a pack of boars dispersing and running into the woods. It was definitely a good thing they weren't in the square.<p>

A few minutes later, however, they caught sight of Astrid yanking a disgruntled Finn back to the house. Erick began to feel incredibly uncomfortable.

"I should go." he said, giving Adrianna an apologetic look.

Adrianna nodded and watched him scamper back into the village, giving Astrid and Finn a wide berth as he did. When Astrid caught sight of her daughter, covered with cooking ingredients, some of her anger turned to shame.

"Did you make that mess in the kitchen this morning?" she asked her



daughter.

Adrianna nodded. "I'm sorry, mommy."

Astrid suddenly felt the urge to punch something but she wasn't about to hit her children. "I will deal with you later, young lady." she said as she passed her daughter on the way into the house.

As soon as they got to Finn's room, Astrid pushed him in and shut the door behind them.

"I'm sorry, mom, I wasn't thinking!" Finn cried, his hands running through his hair in a way that was strangely reminiscent of his father.

"I know you didn't mean it." Astrid conceded. "And I owe you an apology, buddy." Finn looked up at his mother, dumbfounded. "I shouldn't have blamed you for the mess in the kitchen. That was wrong. I'm sorry."

Finn bit his lip. "It's okay, mom." he said after a few seconds.

"But that doesn't excuse you from punishment. What you did today was very dangerous and very stupid." Astrid sat him down on the bed and put an arm around him. "Why did you do it?"

"I just wanted to catch a boar like all the big Viking men. Like Poppy." Finn admitted with his eyes fixed on his knees.

Astrid put a hand on his chin and turned his head up so that he was facing her. "The time for chasing down boars and doing all the things big Viking men do will come before you know it." she brushed his bangs out from in front of his eyes and made a mental note to give him a haircut. "But you can't do things like that anymore. Do you understand?"

Finn nodded. "Am I getting punished?"

"Oh yes." Astrid smiled. "You are not to leave this house for a week."

"A week?" Finn's mouth dropped open.

"A week. Except to help clean up your mess. If I catch you outside without your dad or someone to supervise you while you're working, it'll be another week." Astrid stood up. "You need to think about what you've done, young man. And all the trouble you've caused."

Finn stuck out his lip in a pout but as his mother shut the door, he thought that perhaps he deserved his punishment. After all, he had almost gotten Inga killed. He made a mental note not to try anything that dangerous again. The next time he needed to rebel, he would be much more subtle.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid was ascending the staircase when Hiccup finally pushed open the door to his house. Their eyes met for a second.<p>

"You're home late." she said in monotone.

"Busy day. No thanks to our son." Hiccup took off his coat and hung it on a hook.

"He's being punished."

"Good."

There was another pause. Astrid tensed slightly, her hand gripping the railing. "Aren't you coming up to bed?"

Hiccup shook his head, still not meeting her gaze. "I have some things to work on first."

Astrid nodded and, without saying another word, walked up the stairs in silence. She had a strong feeling that Hiccup wasn't remaining downstairs just to get some work done. He had done a lot of late night projects over the last month or so.

Her theory was proven correct the next morning when his side of the bed was empty. She got out of the bed and tiptoed down the stairs. He was lying on the couch, fast asleep and curled up in a blanket.

Blinking back tears, Astrid climbed back up the stairs and went back into their room. The silence of the master bedroom began to echo in her ears and before she knew it, she couldn't hold back her sobs any longer.

What she didn't know was that the wall between her bedroom and Finn's was quite a bit thinner than she realized. And Finn, always the early riser, could hear every sound she was making.

\* \* \*

><p><em>I have apparently decided not to spare you the drama in this story in these early updates. I guess it's hard to write fluff when your main couple won't even look at each other.<em>

\_Fun fact: the grasshopper portion of this chapter was actually based on a true story. Apparently a counselor at the camp where I worked did exactly that to make a young girl, who was upset over something, feel better. Having gotten to know the counselor in question, I am easily able to believe that this actually happened, even though I wasn't present for it.\_

\_Special thanks to \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for some assistance and being a great beta as always. Also to \_\_\*\*amyboomerang\*\*\_\_, who supplied the story that turned into the grasshopper incident.\_

\_Don't forget to review!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

### 3. Final Blow

\_Well the plot thickens as you all are starting to realize that

Hiccup and Astrid are, in fact, a realistic married couple and have arguments. This is quite the rough patch and I won't dare spoil anything about what's coming up. To the guest who freaked out over the child abuse warning, this story has about as much child abuse as \_\_Little Miracles\_\_. Take that any way you like.\_\_

\_Also, and this is the first time I've ever done this, I kind of have to throw in this flashback that I meant to be a flashback from the beginning but then realized I couldn't fit within the present day narrative. So sorry it's confusing but that's what I get for not throwing this at the end of \_\_Under Pressure\_\_, which is what I should have done. Then again, you might not have read it and I really like it. And, fun fact, this opening is the first thing I ever wrote for this story. The first part of chapter 2 is the second!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Three: Final Blow<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Two Years Ago<strong>\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>The pain was agonizing. Spreading from his chest, from his neck from his arms... but he had to get up. He wasn't dead yet. Hiccup sat up and looked at his adversary.<em>

\_Dagur stared at him in shock. "What-\_"

"\_I'm s-sorry Dagurâ€|" Hiccup breathed into his face. "But I can't let you win."\_

\_Dagur made a move to grab the dagger sticking out of Hiccup's chest, but the Hooligan quickly collided the Berserker's nose with his forehead. Dagur cried out, recoiling back. Hiccup wrapped his right leg around the back of Dagur's left knee, pulled back and shoved Dagur forward.\_

\_Dagur's leg slipped out from under him and he screamed in shock. He grabbed Hiccup's arm, pulling him over the edge with him. Hiccup's stomach slammed into Toothless' black hide and Dagur's hand slipped from his.\_

\_Hiccup watched Dagur plummet toward the rocks below with wide eyes. Toothless yanked to a halt, hovering in place to watch the enemy fall and\_\_ smash into the rocks with a sickening crack that set Hiccup's teeth on edge. In a daze, he watched Dagur lie there, completely unmoving, watched as the small pool of blood formed underneath Dagur's head...\_

Hiccup gasped as he awoke, feeling trapped by the blankets tightly wrapped around his body. It took a little while to loosen them enough to slip out but he managed to extricate himself from his own bed. Astrid slept on, completely unburdened. Good. She didn't need to be disturbed.

The young chief winced as he turned his head. The gash on his neck was healing quite nicely but it still throbbed uncomfortably,

especially on nights like this. He smoothed out the blankets so that Astrid wouldn't be cold and found himself in a bit of a conundrum. He could try to crawl back into bed so he couldâ€¦ no. His heart was still pounding, his head still reeling with memories he desperately wanted to keep down. He wasn't going to get any more sleep tonight.

There was always the saddle adjustment he'd been working on. That might distract him.

His metal leg made an odd clunking noise as he descended the staircase. He wondered how long it would take to get used to his new prosthetic. A few months perhaps. Who knew, really?

Hiccup lit a candle and placed it over his work table. He blinked a few times to try and clear his vision before getting out some parchment and trying to draw up a design. He would measure Toothless later. His Night Fury was likely to be asleep. No one was awake at that hour.

Or were they?

There was a strange noise above his head. He froze, straining his ears so he could hear it more clearly. Footsteps. Little footsteps. Finn or Adrianna had awakened. A second later, Hiccup knew exactly who was awake and exactly why.

"Addie?"

The footsteps stopped for a moment.

"It's okay, Addie, it's me."

The noise traveled down the stairs and within seconds, a tiny girl, her hair messy and her hand clasped around a stuffed Night Fury, came into view. Hiccup smiled grimly.

"Bad dreams again?" he kept his voice soft to avoid waking up the rest of his family.

Adrianna nodded, wiping her eyes with her arm. She looked like she had been awake for a while. Perhaps the noises Hiccup was making as he descended the staircase had alarmed her.

"Why didn't you come to us?" her father asked, looking concerned.

"I didn't want to wake you up." Adrianna replied in a higher register. "Why are you awake?"

"I had a bad dream too." Hiccup said after a moment's hesitation.

Adrianna stared at her father, her eyebrows furrowing slightly. "I thought grown-ups didn't have bad dreams."

Hiccup chuckled. He thought it was a bit cruel to be amused that his daughter would think such a thing. She almost always crawled into bed with her parents after her nightmares. Why wouldn't she assume that she would outgrow them? Yet another thing to add to the harsh realities from which he would not be able to shield her. One down, a

thousand more to go.

"Sometimes grown-ups have a lot of bad dreams after something bad happens to them." Hiccup motioned for her to come forward. She tentatively walked up to him. "And something very bad happened to me. I got hurt by an evil man who wanted to take you away. And sometimes when I go to sleep-

"You're scared again. 'Cause even though he's gone in real life, he won't go away from your dreams." Adrianna interrupted, her green eyes fixed on his.

Hiccup paused for a few minutes, staring at his daughter who understood. Gods, why didn't he think of that? She had been crawling into bed with him and Astrid for the past year and a half. And yet here he was. Keeping secrets from his family because he didn't want to burden them. But his little girl had already been burdened. She knew his fear. She had been facing it longer than he had.

"Do they ever go away?" his daughter asked, breaking the silence at last.

Hiccup opened his mouth but no sound came out. He blinked a few times. A father is supposed to know the answers to the important questions. Yet he didn't know. She had voiced his greatest fear: that he would never get away. That he would be haunted by the most horrifying experience of his life until he died.

He couldn't answer. He stared into her wide eyes and noticed, for the first time, that they seemed older. Like a weary old woman had been trapped inside of his child's body. A woman who had gone through so much pain and who wanted to be free.

He hated it.

The torture she endured on so many nights. The fear she faced every single day. The times she was thrown into the most terrible moments of her life. Always over her shoulder, always haunting her like a dark shadow in the corner of her eye that lingered but never came into focus.

He knew because it was his turn to experience it. He had felt the fear, been thrown into his nightmares even during daylight. He had felt his past following him, sometimes so closely he could almost touch it. Was this what his daughter had faced for the last year and a half?

He leaned forward and put his arms around her, hugging her tightly as if holding her would make her feel safe again, would banish the monster of her own mind for good. She held him as if she was trying to do the same thing.

Her question still echoed in his mind. Would the nightmares ever go away?

"I don't know, Addie." he whispered in a trembling voice. "But I do know that you don't have to face this alone anymore."

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Present Day<strong>\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Agonizing pain ripped through his chest as he lay there, Dagur the Deranged triumphantly leering down at him. A burst of strength Hiccup didn't know he had coursed through him and he sat up.<em>

\_Dagur stared at him in shock. "What-"\_

"\_I'm s-sorry Dagurâ€|" Hiccup breathed into his face. "But I can't let you win."\_

\_Though Dagur made a move to extricate the dagger from Hiccup's chest, the Hooligan was too fast for him. His head collided with the Berserker's, causing Dagur to cry out and recoil. Hiccup wasted no time in wrapping his right leg around the back of Dagur's left knee, pulling back, and shoving Dagur forward.\_

\_Dagur's leg slipped out from under him and he screamed in shock. He grabbed Hiccup's arm, pulling him over the edge with him. Hiccup's stomach slammed into Toothless' black hide and Dagur's hand slipped from his.\_

\_Dagur was screaming. The sound echoed in his head until there was a sickening crack and all went silent. Dazed, he watched Dagur lie there, completely unmoving, watched as the small pool of blood formed underneath the now dead Berserker's head...\_

Hiccup awoke with a jolt. He was covered in a cold sweat and his heart was pounding in his ears. It was that dream again. The same dream he had almost every night. He put a hand up to his neck and felt the scars on his skin, which stung as a result of the dream but had, in actuality, healed quite a while ago. He looked over to the other side of the bed and was slightly relieved to see that Astrid slept on, undeterred by her husband's nightmare.

There would be no more sleep that night. Hiccup knew that he could probably crawl back into bed at dawn and fall asleep instantly but he only got an hour or so before his wife woke him. Judging by the angle of the moonlight in the window, he guessed that it was about two in the morning. He had only gotten three hours of sleep. All in all, a typical night's rest. He thought irritably that Astrid oughtn't have asked him to sleep next to her since he wouldn't even spend most of the night with her. Surely she had to know that.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, careful not to disturb his wife's slumber. The last thing he needed was her asking questions he didn't want to answer. Only one person truly understood and she slept in the bedroom farthest down the hall.

He yawned as he traipsed down the stairs. He had some designs he could work on in the hours before he would be able to sleep again. No one was downstairs. It was rather peaceful to work in the early hours of the morning. This particular morning, however, he found himself hoping for company.

Adrianna had been joining him on some of the nights when he couldn't fall back to sleep due to nightmares. As Hiccup drew up some designs

for a more efficient tail control for Toothless, his mind wandered a bit. How long had it been since they had started doing this? Two years? Yes... it must have been about two years now. Neither he nor his daughter had ever told Astrid or Finn that they had late night meetings. There was something special about them, like their monthly Saturdays together. Something that was completely and irrevocably theirs.

His wish for company soon came true. The young girl descended the staircase about an hour later. She was pleased to see that her father was already awake. Some nights she was alone. She didn't like those nights, the ones in which she lit a candle in her room and prayed that daylight would come soon. Her father, her sole confidant in these matters, was much better company when they were undisturbed by the rest of the family.

"I had a feeling you'd be coming down." Hiccup smiled warmly and opened an arm so that he could comfort his still shaking child. She immediately allowed him to hold her close, placing a head on his shoulder. "Really bad one, huh?" Adrianna nodded. "Do you want to talk about it?"

The girl sniffled and shook her head. She told her father everything... except what was in her nightmares. The scenes she had to relive almost every night were impossible to put into words. He had given up pressing for details because they tended to trigger flashbacks that could take hours from which to recover.

"You don't have to tell me what happened in your dream." Hiccup said, tenderly rubbing her shoulder so that it would be warm and, hopefully, she would stop shaking. "But you were so little when... when it happened. How much do you remember?"

Adrianna bit her lip, her eyes fixed on her fidgeting fingers. "All of it."

"I know the feeling." Hiccup kissed her on the top of the head. "Some things you just can't forget."

"No matter how much you want to." Adrianna finished with another sniffle. "What are you working on?"

"Oh, this? Just some designs for a new tail-fin for Toothless. I'm not sure I'm actually going to build it. Something seems off about it." Hiccup pushed the papers a bit closer to his daughter so that she see the pictures, even if she couldn't read the words.

Adrianna's tongue darted between her parted lips. It was a sign that she was concentrating with all her might and Hiccup found it cute. Not to mention somewhat familiar.

"Wouldn't it fall apart?" she asked after about a minute.

Hiccup eyed the design again. "Why would it fall apart?"

"Well..." Adrianna seemed to enjoy her moment of brilliance. Her eyes flitted to her father's face, which she knew would light up when she shared her theory. "You put the metal bit in a different place."

"Yes. It has better wind resistance." Hiccup raised an eyebrow.

"Well if you moved the tail to the side, it would rip 'cause there's no support." Adrianna pointed to the flaw. "Toothless would crash. And then he'd pout. He always pouts when he's clumsy."

Hiccup smiled. "Too true." he looked over the plans again. "All right, that's the last time I try to do any work in the middle of the night."

Adrianna giggled and Hiccup tightened his hold on her shoulder.

"What's going on here?"

Father and daughter turned around, identical pairs of green eyes widening as they focused on the rigid form of Astrid, her arms crossed, her lips pursed, and her eyes narrowed. Hiccup knew his wife's mannerisms like the back of his hand but it didn't take much observation skills to figure out that she was livid.

"Addie and I are just talking." he said after a few seconds.

He had waited a bit too long. Astrid's body stiffened.

"In the middle of the night?" she asked with a voice as tense as her posture.

"We couldn't sleep." Adrianna mumbled. "Nightmares..."

Hiccup wished she hadn't verbalized that last part but he conceded that their late night meetings couldn't go unnoticed forever. And he wasn't about to ask her to lie.

"Nightmares?" Astrid's eyes bored into her husband's. "What sort of nightmares?"

Hiccup was beginning to feel distinctly annoyed now. "Same as they've always been."

Astrid looked from her husband to her daughter and back several times. Hiccup's arm was still draped around the girl's shoulders almost like it was instinctual. Almost like... like he was protecting her from her own mother. She gritted her teeth, trying hard not to raise her voice.

"How long has this been going on?" she asked in a voice that dripped with false nonchalance.

Adrianna felt Hiccup's arm stiffen around her shoulders. "Since the nightmares started." he said, his eyes fixed on Astrid's as if silently challenging her. "We understand what it's like to be hesitant to go back to sleep."

Astrid's eyebrows raised. "Two years?" she huffed, her teeth gritting together almost painfully in her mouth. "Two years?"

"We didn't want to wake you up." Adrianna admitted, her gaze now



focused on her feet.

"Go upstairs to bed, Anna." Astrid pointed in the direction of her daughter's room.

"But -"

"Just go, sweetie. I'll be up in a minute." Hiccup gently pushed the girl's back.

The couple watched their daughter climb up the stairs and remained silent until they heard her door shut behind her.

"No more of these late night meetings. She needs sleep. You need sleep." Astrid said after a few seconds of tense silence.

"She needs someone to talk to." Hiccup shook his head. "And you wouldn't understand."

"Don't tell me what I can and can't understand." Astrid snapped, her voice a bit louder than perhaps it should have been. "You've been pushing Finn and me away."

Hiccup couldn't stop himself from laughing. "I'm not doing anything! I'm just being there for my daughter."

"It's no wonder she can't read if she isn't getting enough sleep." Astrid snarled. "I don't care what you get up to at all hours of the night but letting her stay up and have these little meetings is irresponsible!"

Hiccup stood up, smirking as he now stared down at his wife's face. "She's still scared!"

"So tell her she'll be fine and to go back to sleep!" Astrid didn't even bother to keep her voice down.

"I'm not having this conversation with you." Hiccup pushed past her and grabbed his coat.

"Where are you going?" Astrid balled her fists.

"To kiss my daughter good night and then for a walk." Hiccup glared at her as he ascended the staircase.

"You can't just keep running away!" Astrid shouted.

Hiccup stared at her for a few seconds before averting his eyes and arriving at the top of the stairs. Astrid could hear him open Adrianna's bedroom door and shut it behind him.

\* \* \*

><p>The air was nippy before the sun rose above the horizon. Hiccup managed to calm his frightened daughter by telling her that the stuffed Night Fury he had made for her three and a half years previously would keep her safe. It was a lie he frequently repeated and, though she was no longer naive enough to believe him, she seemed to take comfort in it anyway.<p>

He kept his gaze on the ground, watching his foot and prosthetic take each step with mild interest. His chilled hands were in his pockets and his breath rose in front of his face in little clouds that would likely disappear once the weather turned warmer. He hardly noticed where he was going until a large body stepped in front of him from an adjacent street. His prosthetic scraped in the dirt when he halted and the large man jerked in his direction at the sudden sound.

"Hiccup?"

"Fishlegs?"

The men recognized and called the other by name simultaneously. They stared at each other in shock for a moment, confused at seeing the other at such a late hour.

Fishlegs looked at his friend, who looked distinctly upset about something. He thought it would be pointless to ask about the cause of his foul mood. Hiccup had taken to simply glaring at anyone who wanted to talk to him about anything family or emotions related.

"What are you doing out?" Hiccup asked after a few very confusing seconds.

"Peri woke up in the middle of the night. Ruff and I calmed her down but now I can't get back to sleep." Fishlegs shrugged. "I'm used to it by now."

"Well with five kids, I'd hope so." Hiccup gave his friend a halfhearted smile. "You and Ruff done yet?"

"Probably not. I hated being an only child and Ruff always wanted more than just Tuff to keep her company. We want a big family." Fishlegs chuckled. "Before we started dating, I would never have guessed Ruff was the maternal type. I guess people never stop surprising you."

"Yeah." Hiccup shook his head. "Well... that's great. Have a nice walk."

Hiccup turned his thin frame down a side street, but Fishlegs stopped him with a large hand outstretched.

"Wait..." Fishlegs took a step closer. "Are you okay? You've been... off."

"Off?" Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "Off how?"

"Hiccup... I mean a lot of us have been thinking it." Fishlegs took a deep breath. "Lately you've been kind of short tempered. You don't like to talk to people. You keep to yourself. We're not sure why."

"I'm fine, Fish." Hiccup took a step back. "Just drop it."

"Look, I wouldn't be saying this if I didn't care. But some of us have started having... meetings." Fishlegs fidgeted a bit and Hiccup felt a twinge of anger rise in his chest. Meetings? "Just talking

about everything that's been happen-"

"It doesn't matter, Fish! I do what I have to do! I said drop it!" Hiccup shouted, his voice echoing in the still silence of the deserted village square.

"Okay okay. Sorry for trying to be a friend." Fishlegs nervously added yet abruptly turned back the way he came.

Hiccup watched him go for a moment, quickly realizing that his outburst only proved his friend's point. And the rest of the village's apparently. A short trot caught him up to Fishlegs and he held a hand out to stop his friend.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shouted. You're right, I am more irritable. But I can't... I don't want to talk about it."

Fishlegs nodded. "We know you don't and I'm not asking for details. It's your business, your family. And I don't want to lecture you... but you're the chief. Everything you say and do directly affects all of us. And the last few months have been... concerning."

Hiccup grunted in response, almost refusing to comment. He kicked a loose pebble out of the dirt and balanced on the edge of his prosthetic expertly. Sensing he was not getting anywhere, Fishlegs sighed. Hiccup looked up at him through his bangs. Was it just his imagination or did Fish sound... tired? And it wasn't because of the hour.

"Just... Just let us know, okay? We're your friends, and if you don't want to tell everyone then talk to me. Or Gobber. We've been your confidants before and you know we won't blab if you don't want us to."

"So says the guy who informs me that there are secret meetings of which I am the topic." Hiccup replied sarcastically.

Fishlegs winced, but quickly added, "You know what I mean. Don't think your sarcasm fools everyone. I want to help-"

"I know, Fish. I know." Hiccup sighed tiredly. "I will. Just not yet."

Fishlegs gently patted his shoulder and smiled warmly. "Get some sleep, Chief."

The burly man walked back up the street, his boots crunching in the dirt.

"Night Fish." Hiccup gently called after him.

He stood silently in the torchlight before turning back to the hill leading to the bridge and by extension, his home. In all honestly he didn't want to go back. He was no longer tired; conflicting emotions from his family and now his friends swarmed his mind.

Maybe he could just make a mug of tea and sit outside, watch the stars. Oftentimes as a teenager he would open the ceiling door and watch the heavens rotate while the hours passed and sleep would evade him. Perhaps he would do that again from the porch. Hopefully

Toothless would be awake soon and he could get an early morning flight in before the day's stresses began. Correction: they already began. He wasn't outside for nothing after all.

His house loomed in the distance, a soft glow of candle light winking at him from the kitchen window. Apparently Astrid hadn't blown it out when she went back upstairs. How thoughtful of her. That was a change.

Hiccup sat on his front steps, huffing at the angry thoughts still churning. His people were holding meetings about him? What kind of meetings? Was it even legal to hold meetings about the chief against his knowledge? His eyebrows took a jump when the thought occurred to him: mutineers did that. He scoffed lightly. He wasn't that bad of a chief. Surely they weren't planning to get rid of him already. They had to understand that two children and a wife who was becoming increasingly snippy would cause anyone to be irritable.

Things would get better one day. The nightmares would go away and Astrid would come around. He was just having a low point in life, Nothing else. But he did recognize one key point that he was thankful Fishlegs had mentioned: his actions and attitudes directly affected the village. And if what Fishlegs said was true, the results were apparently not so good.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid smiled sweetly at the heat of the sun basking on her face. She listened happily as Adrianna quietly sounded out her word list. Twenty minutes of reading in front of Gobber's forge was proving to be a successful lesson so far. She hoped bringing Adrianna to the village for a session would be profitable due to the people milling about. Originally she assumed it would be very distracting, but Adrianna seemed to focus better with some background noise. It was strange, but if she was reading, Thor strike her down if she complained.<p>

"A... An..." Astrid glanced at her daughter, biting her tongue to keep from blurting out the word. "Annn...d. And!" Adrianna grinned. "I did it!"

Astrid nodded. "Now let's try these." she replaced the three letter word list with a four letter word list. Adrianna's smile immediately disappeared. "What?"

"I did my reading. You said I could play when I was done." Adrianna said, scowling at the three sheets of paper that had been placed in front of her.

"You can when you're finished reading these words." Astrid commanded.

"You didn't say I was going to have to read more!" Adrianna whined.

"You wouldn't have agreed if I told you." Astrid replied in an almost nonchalant tone. "Sound it out, An-"

"You lied to me."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "I omitted the truth. There's a difference."

"Daddy says to never lie." Adrianna fixed her bright green gaze on her mother.

"Well your precious daddy isn't here." Astrid said through gritted teeth. "This isn't daddy time okay? You are with me and so help me Thor you will sit here until you read these pages!"

Adrianna nearly screeched in response, tugging at her hair. A few people stopped to look at the pair of blondes.

Astrid faked a smile but seethed at her daughter. "Stop acting like this and try again."

"No!"

"Don't you tell me no, I said sound it out! For gods' sake, Anna, you're seven years old, you need to learn to read!" Astrid pointed to the word on the paper, balling her other hand into a fist so tightly her fingernails were cutting into her palm. "What is wrong with you? Why won't you listen to me?"

"Why would I want to? You're so mean!" Adrianna snapped, pushing the paper away.

"I am the only one who cares about making sure you have an education." Astrid pushed the paper back in front of her daughter.

"Care? You don't care! You just want to yell at me, that's all you ever do!" Adrianna shouted, her face turning red.

"You think I like this? You think I enjoy having a daughter who is years behind her peers in reading? You are sadly mistaken." Astrid said through gritted teeth.

"Then stop!"

"I'm not going to let you embarrass this family!" Astrid gripped Adrianna's shoulder, causing the girl to squirm. "What do you think it's going to look like to everyone else if you can't read? People are going to think you're stupid, is that what you want?"

"Daddy doesn't care if I can read or not!" Adrianna mumbled into her lap

"Well your daddy isn't here right now! I am your mother, you are supposed to listen to me!"

Adrianna stood up. "No!"

"Don't you talk back to me, young lady!" Astrid seethed, grabbing her daughter's wrist.

Adrianna gave her mother a very false smile. "Oh, I'm sorry, you want me to stop responding? Fine, I'll stop!"

Both blonde Haddocks failed to notice that most villagers, a group

that included Gobber, Erick, and Heather, had stopped to stare at the ensuing argument.

"Sit back down." Astrid breathed in her daughter's face, determined not to make a scene.

Adrianna stared back in defiance. "No."

"Stop being a brat and sit back down!" Astrid grabbed the girl's shoulders and tried to force her back in the chair.

"Ow, let go of me!" Adrianna shrieked.

"I said sit down!" Astrid pushed her daughter's shoulders down but the girl remained upright.

Adrianna defiantly remained on her feet and looked her mother directly in the eye. "No wonder daddy can't stand you."

SMACK!

The force of Astrid's hand across Adrianna's face caused the girl to stumble backward. The mother heard a collective gasp from the villagers standing nearby. Heather nearly screamed at what she had just witnessed. Gobber dropped the bucket he was carrying, his mouth wide open in shock. In fact, as Astrid looked out over the crowd of horrified Vikings who had just witnessed this incident, there seemed to be a lot of open mouths. A lot of wide eyes. The looks on their faces ripped through her. She had slapped her child. What's more, she had slapped the girl out in the open. She couldn't even fathom why she had done it. It seemed that for a moment, for less than a second, she had completely lost control.

By the time she looked back to where her daughter was standing, her gaze met thin air. She turned around just in time to see the little girl running at a breakneck speed toward the Great Hall.

"Anna... Anna, wait!" Astrid called, running after her but stopping when she realized that her daughter had too much of a head start.

It took a few seconds for the young mother to realize exactly why her daughter had made a beeline to the Hall instead of home. Hiccup was holding a meeting there about... well, about some sort of harvesting thing... she hadn't been listening when he told her. It was too late to stop her daughter from telling her husband what had happened... what she had done. She felt a burning sensation behind her eyes, her heart pounding in her chest, her hands trembling with dread. This wasn't going to end well for anyone.

Suddenly, she became acutely aware of the silence of the village square. She whipped her head around to face her fellow Hooligans, many of whom were still in shock. Erick, on the other hand, was glaring at her with a sort of righteous anger. She was suddenly overcome with the desire to slap him as well but, besides the fact that his mother was two feet away from him, she really didn't have a solid reason to other than that this eight year old boy had the audacity to criticize her parenting.

"What are you looking at?" Astrid snapped at the crowd.

Instantly, almost like nothing had happened at all, everyone went back to what they were doing, apparently not bold enough to confront her for what she had done. Erick still looked furious but he refrained from commenting as he walked away with his mother.

This was it. Astrid looked over at the Great Hall, which now contained her husband and daughter. Any second now, she would be confronted by a livid Hiccup. She took a few shaky steps in the direction of her house. If she was going to have an argument with her husband, she wanted as few people to hear it as possible.

\* \* \*

><p>The farming members of the council were a funny bunch. They were the sort of people who didn't mind getting dirt under their fingernails or wear shirts with holes in them. The sort of people who didn't care if they smelled like dragon dung or the copious amounts of sweat that would coat their bodies as they worked. Hiccup enjoyed farming meetings. He wasn't a stickler for traditions and there was sort of an unwritten rule that farmers were exempt from ordinary Viking attire and, at times, attitudes.<p>

The meeting was coming to a close when he heard the large double doors of the Hall creak as they opened to admit a tiny girl. He smiled. Adrianna often liked to come in toward the end of his meetings so that he could have a bit of extra time with her between duties as chief. These little moments with her were precious to him.

He turned back to the group of farmers to wrap up the meeting but a sound caught his attention and distracted him completely. There was a sniffle... and then a hiccup.

"As you know, harvest time is limited so... so you need to make sure... make sure..."

Hiccup peered at his daughter and his heart stopped beating for just a second. Her little hand was covering an angry red mark on the left side of her face. She was crying as silently as she could but there was no masking the high pitched hiccups that sporadically emanated from her throat. Feeling propelled by paternal instincts, Hiccup made a beeline to his little girl, his sentence unfinished and forgotten.

The moment he reached her, he got down on his knees so that he could be face to face with his child. "Addie, who hit you?" he gently moved her hand away from her cheek and was dismayed to notice that the mark was quite a bit bigger than he had initially thought.

Adrianna shook her head, tears running down her face and dripping onto the front of her shirt. Hiccup put his hands on her upper arms and squeezed them in what he hoped was a reassuring way. In truth, he was shaking with fury. The size of the mark indicated that it certainly wasn't a child who had inflicted it. An adult had hit his daughter. Whoever it was, he already wanted to strangle them.

"Addie, come on, sweetie. Tell me who hit you." his voice was trembling with the effort to keep it calm and soothing.

Adrianna sniffled and stared at her shoes. "Mommy."

"What?" Hiccup bellowed, making everyone in the room, including Adrianna, jump in shock.

The Hall was spinning. Astrid had \_slapped\_ his little girl! \_Her\_ little girl. A bubble of rage, the likes of which he felt so rarely he almost forgot it was possible, burst within his chest.

"All right." he muttered to himself, his face burning and probably turning red. "That's it." He took his daughter by the hand, stood up, and faced the farmers. "Meeting adjourned." he said in a voice devoid of emotion.

As he walked out of the Great Hall, his hand gripping his daughter's, he looked over in the direction of his house. He didn't want to face his wife but he knew he must for his little girl's sake. But she didn't have to hear the confrontation.

"I'm taking you to Gobber's." he told her.

"Why?" Adrianna asked. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. But your mommy and I need to have a talk." he took a deep breath. "A very important talk."

\* \* \*

><p><em>Oh my, I am so excited about the next chapter! It promises to be epic!<em>

\_Special thanks to \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for writing some portions of this when I was being a bad writer this week and to \_\_\*\*Miss Pookamonga\*\*\_\_ for cheering me up yesterday after a bout of severe depression and whose stories help me with my descriptions.\_

\_Speaking of depression, I'm kind of in the middle of it right now. I was triggered by something I saw on facebook and my mood went south. I'm still hurting over it and it really was stupid. In any case, I can't write while depressed but could you pray for me (if you're the praying sort, of course), mostly that I snap out of this? It's not just depression either, it's also anger. I know God wants me to forgive the people in my life who have exacerbated my depression but at this point I am completely unable to do so. In fact, I kind of derive a sort of fierce pleasure in hating them. Not godly. So please pray. Sorry if that was too much personal stuff. I know you all use me for entertainment and emotional stimulation but I hope a few of you see me as a human being who needs a bit of help now and then.\_

\_Anyway, please review!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

#### 4. Storm

\_So excited about this chapter! But I will say that it contains intense emotional scenes and mild language. I went for all-out



realism here and it's one of the most risky chapters I've ever written. Not to mention the longest by far!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Four: Storm<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup marched up to his old mentor, still gripping Adrianna's hand in his. He didn't notice as most of his people stepped far away from him when he came close. He didn't see the fearful looks or the cautious glances.<p>

"Gobber." Hiccup stopped beside the older man abruptly, also failing to notice the dust swirling around their ankles. Gobber turned with an eyebrow raised. "Watch Addie for me."

"Hiccup-"

"I'll be back s-"

"Would ya shut up and listen to me for a moment?" Gobber interrupted, making Hiccup huff. He didn't want to listen to anyone aside from Astrid. "Don't be too hard on her."

Hiccup blinked, sure he heard wrong. Gobber blinked back, looked quite serious.

Hiccup chuckled humorlessly. "You're serious?" The smile was replaced by a small amount of the anger roiling within him. "You want me to just let this go?"

"I am not condoning what Astrid did but," Gobber looked down at Adrianna and shortly continued, "I will say this whether she hears me or not, Anna was not acting proper. Not at all."

"So that's a proper excuse to be slapped?"

"Well when your seven year old daughter makes snide comments about her parents marriage, I think it's understandable. Anna has no place to say anything about such things." Gobber sighed, looking back up at Hiccup. "Astrid lost control for but a moment, Hiccup. But if you're going to yell at her, your daughter deserves a lecture as well."

"Seems you've already covered that," Hiccup snipped. "Would you like to lecture Astrid for me too?"

"You weren't planning on even talking to your daughter, Hiccup! I am not so blind as to not notice the favoritism you constantly display. If you won't teach Anna to stop acting like a brat around your wife, then do not get bent out or shape when others step in."

Hiccup's arms shook with fury and people didn't fail to notice the shade of red his face had acquired. They backed away but Gobber stood firm. Countless years of being close friends with the Haddocks gave him near immunity to their outraged anger.

Hiccup's lips finally parted. "Don't make me ask someone else to

watch Addie."

"If I didn't want to protect her from this oncoming explosion, I wouldn't accept." Gobber seethed back. Then he lowered his voice so only Hiccup heard him. "Both of you are doing this to yourselves. It's not our fault, not your kids fault-"

"\_Take\_ her or move."

Gobber swallowed and stuck his hand out to Adrianna. She continued to stare up at Hiccup with wide, fearful eyes. Gobber noticed her fingers were turning a dark shade of red due to Hiccup squeezing her hand so hard. In his anger he didn't even notice and, always selfless when her father was concerned, the girl didn't complain.

The small blonde steadily let go of her father's hand, gently massaging her fingers before holding Gobber's hand.

Hiccup turned on his heel and stalked toward the bridge leading home. "I will be back at dusk."

Gobber and Adrianna watched him go while everyone else avoided any contact with their temperamental chief. The older folk remembered Stoick's anger issues but never was Stoick this angry \_this\_ often. It was very disconcerting, to say the least.

Gobber stepped forward into the square when he was sure Hiccup was out of earshot. "All of you to your homes. This confrontation ain't gonna be good and I have a feeling we are all going to end up hearing it if we stay outdoors." Adrianna looked up at him with wide eyes. People scurried to their homes without further question. Gobber sighed heavily and pulled Adrianna toward his home. "Come on, little lady. Let's get a cold cloth on that cheek."

\* \* \*

><p>Toothless knew something was up.<p>

His rider hadn't been as aloof with him as he had been with his wife and son but there was still a sort of disconnect between them that wasn't there mere months earlier. The Night Fury had suspected that something was wrong ever since his human had killed the one who threatened to rip apart his family. A sort of darkness in his eyes that none but he could see. And perhaps the girl. That may have been why his rider and the female young were nearly inseparable ever since.

But over the last month or so, since just after the twins' seventh birthday, Toothless' human had taken a turn for the worse. He had a tendency to lash out at people, his wife included. Toothless wasn't as familiar with the female human with whom his own human was so enamored but he could see the pain in her eyes. Pain she masked by lashing back at him. He and Stormfly began to feel like they were on opposite sides of a fierce war brewing within their riders' house. And the young were the innocents thrown into the mix by no fault of their own. Wishing they could speak the human language of which they knew so little, he and Stormfly did their best to remind their humans of their vows taken just under eight years ago.

Not having young of his own, Toothless had, in some ways, learned how

to be a father alongside his human. He still hadn't forgotten the day the young had escaped their playpen and the female had wandered into a forgotten netter trap. She had been perfectly fine, of course, as had the male (who, for some reason, returned to the house completely devoid of his removable skin) but it was enough to make him protective of the little humans. Like dragon young, they were innocent and needed to be shielded from some of the worst things life had to offer.

But dragons have a sixth sense about oncoming storms and, though the evening was a clear one, Toothless knew a storm was brewing. His human had emerged from the Great Hall, his hand gripping the female young's and trembling in rage. With a soft coo, Toothless followed his human into the square where there had been a verbal confrontation of some sort (he cursed his inability to completely decipher what humans were saying in that confusing language). The large man missing two limbs had taken the female young and now his human was stomping toward the house.

He ran alongside the enraged human, attempting to nudge him with his head in a reassuring way. His rider completely ignored him. His green eyes were flashing, almost glowing in the light of the slowly setting sun. Toothless had seen him angry before but never like this.

When they finally arrived at the Haddock house, Toothless trotted in front of his human and blocked his path.

"Move." Hiccup said, putting out a hand and attempting to shove the dragon to the side.

Toothless narrowed his eyes at the human. He wasn't going to let him past until he had calmed down a bit. The human seethed.

"I said move. I don't have time to go flying, bud." Hiccup tried to move past his dragon but the Night Fury stood firm. "What? What do you want?" Toothless snorted and blinked a few times. "I'm not going to calm down. Astrid hit my daughter!" The dragon narrowed his eyes at the human. "Look, it doesn't matter if Addie said something she shouldn't have said! Astrid went way over the line!"

Toothless sighed deeply. Sometimes his human could be as stubborn as a mule. Not that it wasn't a trait they shared, in fact it was one of the things that brought them closer over the years, but when they were on the opposite side, it could be a bit of a clash of wills. Toothless was determined to make sure his human didn't do anything he would regret.

"If I have to fight you to get into my house, I will. I said move, Toothless. That's an order." Hiccup growled, meeting his dragon's fierce gaze.

Toothless defiantly sat down in front of the door. He continued to glare at the human, trying so very hard to convey exactly what he wanted to say. Which was basically to stop being such an idiot and to calm down. But, as usual, the human seemed determined to make a fool of himself.

"Fine!" Hiccup shouted after several attempts to push past his dragon. "Fine. I'll calm down. If that's what you want."

Toothless cooed contentedly and took a deep breath, hoping his human would take the lead. He did. After several deep breaths, his rider looked almost happy. Satisfied that he had done his job, Toothless stepped away from the front door to allow his human access. He thought a nap in the pen was probably a good idea. He and Stormfly needed to stick together as much as possible.

What Toothless hadn't considered was that Hiccup had been pretending to be calm for quite a long time. After enough practice, he could fake it with ease. Smirking triumphantly at his dragon, he stepped forward and pushed open the door.

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid sat on the couch, her head in her hands and her heart pounding in her ears. She heard the door creak open. She was expecting a shout but was met with silence. It was completely unnerving. There were sounds coming from the doorway, indicating that her husband was hanging up his vest or doing something else to delay the inevitable blowup.<p>

After a few seconds, it appeared that he couldn't distract himself with any pointless task any longer. She heard the clunk of his prosthetic hit the ground several times and could feel him looming over her.

"Addie says you hit her."

She couldn't move. Her head felt too heavy to rise from her shoulders and out of her hands.

"Did you not hear me?" Hiccup's voice, though quiet, was rather dangerous.

"I heard you." she muttered into her hands.

"So did you?"

Why was he asking this? Didn't he believe the testimony of the only member of his family he didn't despise? There was a pause and Astrid realized that he expected an answer.

"Yes."

She glanced upward and watched her husband walk to the other side of the room, his hands in his hair. "What... \_why \_would you do that?" he nearly implored, his breaths deepening as though he was willing himself not to run over and strangle her right then and there.

"It was a mistake." she said tersely through pursed lips.

"Yeah. It was." Hiccup replied, turning his face away even more.

"I shouldn't have... but she was being... she's such a brat sometimes." The excuses were pathetic but she had nothing else to offer.

"So you think it's okay to just hit her?" Hiccup leaned against the kitchen table, gripping it with both of his hands.

"We punish her all the time."

"Yes!" Hiccup shouted, whipping his head around at last and glaring at her. "And we tell her why! We don't just go hitting her whenever we feel like it!"

"It was instinctual, Hiccup, you didn't hear what she said!" Astrid's voice rose in volume as a glimmer of anger began to rise within her. "I didn't go in with the intention of hitting her!"

"You \_hit \_our \_daughter\_! Does that mean \_nothing \_to you?"

"I'm sorry!" Astrid stood up and faced her husband. "I tried to apologize but she just ran to you. It's what she always does! How can I even begin to build a relationship with my daughter if she won't even let me apologize?"

"Why would she \_want \_to?" Hiccup snapped, his knuckles turning white as he continued to grip the table. "You rag on her daily and then you \_slap \_her!"

"I was just trying to step up and teach her to read!" Astrid took a step closer to her husband, who flinched.

"By yelling at her? By forcing her to sit in front of your word lists until she sounds every single word out?" Hiccup turned away, apparently unable to look at her any longer. "I talked to her on the way to Gobber's. She says you grabbed her and when she wouldn't sit down, you slapped her!"

"She was talking back! Yelling at me!" Astrid shouted, now balling her fists.

"No, no, it's more than that!" Hiccup bellowed, his hands letting go of the table and propelling him forward so he stood up straight. "You are \_obsessed \_with making sure everyone is as perfect as you are! Well guess what, Astrid! She isn't like you! If you want a perfect child, stick with Finn!"

"I know she's not like me, Hiccup! If she was, she'd have toughened up by now!" Astrid threw her hands up in disgust.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hiccup leaned in so that they were uncomfortably close.

"Oh, figure it out!"

Hiccup huffed in her face. "So you're saying she's weak and small and useless, just like I was then? Is that it? Sorry if I don't just throw a weapon in her hands every time she is hurting from being abused! I'm sorry if I love my daughter more than that. The suck it up and deal with it mindset will not work on Addie. It won't! The sooner you learn that the better!"

"It worked just fine on Finn!"

Hiccup slapped a hand to his forehead. "Oh yeah, because they're exactly the same person! Silly me for forgetting that!"

Astrid gritted her teeth, tightening her fingers between the spikes

of her armored skirt. "Don't you talk to me like that! I am your wife, a little respect would suffice!"

Hiccup snickered arrogantly. "Because you are \_so \_respectful!"

"This isn't about me!"

"You hit our daughter! Apparently it is all about you! You can't have your way with her so you resort to abuse!"

"It is \_not \_all about me, and I do not! If you want to talk abuse, let's talk emotional abuse! If she had set the boars through the village, you would have hardly batted an eye! But Finn did it and you nearly strangled him for it!"

"He's the next chief!"

"He's only seven!"

"So is Addie!"

"She is old enough that she doesn't need your incessant babying anymore! You treat her like she can do no wrong just because she was missing for a couple of days and-"

Hiccup's heart nearly stopped and he took a step back. "Missing... missing for a couple of..." He stopped, nearly choking on the words. "No. I'm not... no." He held up a hand and smiled sweetly at her like she was a child. "Maybe you hit your head sometime recently and have forgotten; let me refresh your memory. She was taken by a madwoman who left threatening notes, who \_beat \_her, who almost \_killed \_her?" Hiccup waved a few fingers in her face. "Ringing any bells?"

Astrid flicked his hand away, face pink in anger from being treated so flippantly. "Addie was three years old! I hate that it happened but it did and now it's time to move on!"

"Don't you call her that!" Hiccup sneered.

Astrid tossed her head both in irritation and to clear her vision of her bangs. "Oh really? Why not? She's my daughter too! I'll call her whatever I want!"

"Just so you can slap her all you want too, apparently?"

Sick of him bringing up her error that she was truly sorry for, Astrid raised a hand to slap him. Hiccup saw the action coming long before she moved, almost waiting patiently for it. He grabbed her wrist, fingers tight against her flesh. Her fingers began to turn red.

"Don't you \_dare.\_" he hissed through his teeth. "We are not sixteen anymore."

"Then stop acting like it." Astrid hissed in his face before yanking against his grip. It was hard enough to bruise. And he called her abusive. "Let go!"

Hiccup pulled her only closer, his face still red in anger. Being so

close to him when this angry made her nervous. She pushed against his shoulder with her free hand. Hiccup's breath made her bangs flutter against her eyebrow. "You want me to let you go? Swear to me that you will \_not \_slap my daughter again! I don't care if you birthed her or how hard you work with her, she is \_mine \_too and you are not to treat her like that again, do you understand me? Or do I need to spell it out?"

Astrid squeezed the socket joint in his shoulder hard enough to make him wince. "I won't."

Hiccup released her wrist in a jerking fashion. "Fine." He took a few steps back to the door and reached for his coat.

Astrid stared at his back, watching him get ready to leave so easily. "That's it?" She asked with a deep frown. But he was too angry to see the hurt in her eyes.

Hiccup spun around with a very fake smile. "Oh, I'm sorry baby." He cupped her face in his hands and quickly pecked her forehead. "Better?"

He was surprised when Astrid's face twisted in distress and tears welled up in her eyes. What surprised him even more was the very fact that, in all honesty, he didn't feel even the slightest twinge of guilt.

Astrid gently shook her head and looked away, lightly sniffing. "I don't know what happened to you, Hiccup. But you are \_not \_the man I married."

Hiccup shrugged nonchalantly. "You're right. I'm not." He moved past her toward the door again, but without warning she latched onto his arm, refusing to let him go with her grip and gaze. Suddenly she wanted affection? She wanted to know everything? She couldn't have asked questions two years ago? The thoughts only made him angrier and he tried to pull away.

But Astrid held fast, almost pleading in her gaze. "Why? Just talk to me, please?"

At last Hiccup extricated himself from her grip. "Talk? Where were you two years ago? You don't want to talk! You just want to tell me where I screw up and don't measure up to your endless perfection!" At Astrid's furrowed brow, he continued, "I married you because I thought you were perfect. Well little did I know how insanely, ridiculously perfect \_everything \_has to be!" Hiccup exhaled the last few words, suddenly feeling tired.

He was tired of the pain, he was tired of the anger. But most of all he was tired of not being heard by the people who should care. People don't see the current issues and years later when things suddenly fall apart, that's when they want you to relive your past and indulge in all your deep, dark secrets! It was \_infuriating\_!

Astrid huffed, "This isn't about me! Why aren't you the same person, what happened? Just tell me!"

"I'M A MURDERER!" Hiccup thundered. Astrid blinked and took a step back. What? Hiccup a€| murderer?

Hiccup continued in his rant, her unsure expression unseen. "\_That's \_what has changed! The innocent Hiccup you married is DEAD all right?! I walked away from that duel and not with just a few blasted scars! I am \_not \_the same, and I am sorry that I can't still be myself!"

Astrid stared at him in shock. Now she understood what he meant by murderer. To any other person in the world, murderer would be the last term to explain that situation. But to Hiccup, that is exactly what it was.

Hiccup was nearly panting, the angry expression melting off his face to be replaced by the terror he felt almost every night. That expression only tuned Astrid back to his rant. "You will \_never \_understand what it feels like to be a killer because you aren't like me! You could kill somebody, necessary or not, and move on, but I couldn't kill a dragon as a teenager when that is what I dreamed about doing every day since I was a kid! How could I kill a \_human \_and \_not \_be impacted by it?" Hiccup slumped against the door, still staring at her with near anguish. Astrid felt the need to hug him. That is probably what she should have done. But she only stood and stared.

Hiccup felt the need to continue. Maybe she wasn't getting it. "I'm not a killer like you! And neither is Addie. This is why we both differ from you and Finn; we aren't warriors or conquerors. That isn't me and that isn't her."

Something clicked in Astrid's mind at those words. She shook her head, eyes closed, mouth open yet silent. The action made him stop before he spoke his next thought. "Hiccup." She opened her eyes again, still gently shaking her head. "No, you're right that she is not a killer. But she isn't you."

Hiccup furrowed his brow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Astrid took a step away as if this new revelation knocked the wind out of her. She placed a hand on her forehead. "It all makes sense now! Gods, I'm an idiot..."

"What?"

Astrid fixed a glare on him and pointed her finger at his chest. "\_You're \_the problem." Suddenly the passion was back in her voice and with it, her annoyance. "You and your self hatred and insecurities and lashing out at everyone who just wants to help!" Astrid waved a hand toward the village when she spoke of them. Then she lightly shrugged, "Except precious Addie, of course, because she is exactly you \_before\_ you killed Dagur. You're projecting everything you ever think you \_were\_ onto her! You have it stuck in your head that she is the most innocent person! She has to be so protected that nothing, literally nothing, can touch her. Not only is that unrealistic, you think that it's going to fill that crater in your soul! She isn't perfect and she can't fix you and your problems!"

The fire returned to Hiccup as well, his voicing rising along with his thin frame. He stood tall in front of her again. "Then who am I supposed to talk to? You?" He gestured to her with his eyebrows and a



curt, sarcastic nod. "The person who tells people to shut up and deal with their own issues, to stop being a baby?"

Astrid scowled. "I am your wife. And by not confiding in me, by putting someone else before me... it's like you're cheating on me."

Hiccup took a step back, air caught in his throat. "That's... \_disgusting\_, why would you... how could you even say that?"

Astrid pursed her lips, forcing herself to remain calm when he so clearly misunderstood that. "There's more than one way to have an affair, Hiccup. And that's what you are doing."

"So you're basically saying I cheated on you with our seven year old daughter?"

"Technically she was five when you started-"

Hiccup raised a hand to his hair just to let it fall again with a slap. "Do you even hear how ridiculous that sounds?"

"You were giving our daughter the emotional intimacy that should have gone to \_us\_!"

Hiccup breathed a short laugh, shaking his head and walking back towards the kitchen table. "I can't believe I'm hearing this."

"I can't believe I have to tell my husband, a grown man, to stop acting the way he does! That isn't my job!"

"What are you trying to say? That we shouldn't be there for our daughter anymore?"

"THIS IS NOT ABOUT HER, THIS IS ABOUT YOU!"

"You keep bringing her up!"

"Because you put her on that pedestal! Pretend Addie isn't here for a minute, if you can, and think about you! Just you, not Addie! YOU."

"You're not making any sense!"

"When was the last time you held me when \_I\_ \_cried?" Hiccup stopped short at her words. Aside from just a few minutes ago, it was hard to think of Astrid ever crying. Astrid curtly added, "It was yesterday, by the way."

Hiccup swallowed. Was he really that oblivious? Or did she just cry when he was out of the house, which was almost constantly? If that was the case, she couldn't seriously blame him for not holding her every time she was upset.

Astrid continued when his silence ensued. "I'm just trying to say that you need to get it in your head that not everything is about you! And you need to stop projecting all your problems onto our daughter! She's a little girl, she should NOT be put on a pedestal and she should \_not\_ have to be the one who deals with you every time you need to talk to someone!"

"Astrid-

"If you don't knock this off, I'm going to start protecting her from you until you get your act together."

Hiccup opened his mouth to angrily retort but found no words. He let his mouth closed with an audible snap, just projecting his feelings to her with his eyes.

Astrid met his gaze effortlessly, refusing to back down. Her heart ached, but she had to continue her train of thought. She couldn't hold it in any longer. "I don't know what happened to you. You're a terrible husband, you're an irresponsible father," Her voice cracked yet she plowed through. She watched his expression darken into a betrayed expression. "I didn't marry someone like that. And I don't want to be married to it now."

Hiccup shrugged and finally looked at his shoe. He felt his pulse spike but he ignored it, speaking his mind anyway. "You never want to be in the same room as me anyway, so maybe you shouldn't be."

His eyes on the ground, he didn't see the hurt expression. But he sensed her cross her arms. "Are we seriously talking about this?" She asked tersely.

"Yeah. I think we are." Hiccup lifted his eyes to find hers burning just as angrily as his, though their voices were quiet.

Astrid grit her teeth, her heart pounding. "So... what do you want?"

"I don't know. But it isn't this." Hiccup didn't blink or move when he spoke.

Astrid, however, looked toward the door. "I don't want this either. I can't... we never even touch anymore... I just can't do this anymore."

Hiccup looked toward the kitchen to make her disappear from his vision. "Then maybe we shouldn't keep trying." He paused, heartbeat loud in his ears. Suddenly he felt the need to leave. To run. To fly. To scream. To do anything. But he couldn't stand in this house with her another moment. He abruptly stood, prosthetic scraping on the wood floor he had polished eight years ago with his own hands. He felt his thoughts freeze, wondering where in Asgard that memory came from.

"I'm going to get my daughter from Gobber's. We'll be sleeping at my dad's old house. I just... I can't right now." he walked straight to the door, purposefully avoiding her by at least two feet.

Astrid suddenly found herself panicking. What had she done? What if he didn't come back? Why didn't she hug him when her heart and soul longed for it? Why didn't she take the chance when she knew time was so limited? Why?

"Wait-" Astrid reached out and desperately grabbed his arm just as his fingers twisted the handle. "Wait! Hic-" But Hiccup wrenched his hand away, not even bothering to look at her again. His jacket

flapped loudly at the sharp jerk, then the door slammed in her face.

Astrid's heart pounded and she touched the door with her palm. The silence was ringing in her ears, making her own mind spin at a rate faster than she could comprehend. Thoughts, emotions, ideas... everything rushed together.

And then it clicked. She was finished. She didn't love the man Hiccup had become and she didn't want to deal with him anymore. Not now. Not ever. She wanted him gone, out of her life forever.

But more than anything, she wanted the Hiccup she had married. She missed his smile. His playful smirk. His biting sarcasm. His warmth when he would hold her close, the light in his eyes after she kissed him. His determination and stubbornness that wasn't just skin deep. She wanted her Hiccup, the man she fell in love with as a teenager, who single-handedly destroyed the Red Death with Toothless at his side. The man who knew dragons on an almost spiritual level, the man who understood people's feelings and emotions even better than his own because he was so selfless, the man who rocked his children to sleep no matter the hour or the sleep deprivation he knew would result, the man who nearly died for the tribe he loved so much, for the people in his life who meant the most to him. That was the man she had married.

But he was gone.

And what made it even worse was the man who had replaced him. A man so selfish, so snide and arrogant, so angry. So hypocritical. So easy to... despise. She hated him. She hated the man he had become. She hated him to the point of never wanting to see him again. She wanted to burn the house down, torch every living memory she had of him.

Where was her Hiccup? Why did he have to die? Why did he have to turn into a man he would hate every bit as much as her? How could he not see how much pain he was causing?

"Hiccup..."

The name that had once been a comfort to her now ignited her insides with a rage she could no longer contain. A scream of rage tore through her throat as she slammed her fists against the door. The door that symbolized her husband's treatment of her. Never talking, never in the same room, rarely looking her in the eye as he used to, just door after door slammed in her face. She couldn't take it anymore. She wanted him out. She wanted out. She wanted to bid him farewell and not even consider bidding him good luck. She loathed the man he now was. She hit the door with angry screams of rage until her fingers bled and palms bruised, pretending it was the fool himself. Wishing it was him she was hurting and not herself.

She hated him... and she hated herself. She hated that she couldn't convince him to be reasonable and she couldn't convince herself to endure this hard time. She never gave up on any challenge. She thrived on challenges. Yet this was not one she could win... she was losing. And giving up was, for once, the only thing she wanted to do. The irony concerned her: her marriage was the one thing she promised to even the gods that she would strive to keep together. Her vows

were breaking, her husbands vows were breaking. It hurt. It hurt like she had swallowed a bowl of fireworms and they twisted, writhed in the pit of her stomach. But she couldn't change her feelings. There was no stopping those true feelings pouring into her soul. It was over. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

So she wouldn't try.

Tears rained on her face and she sobbed into her hands. She had failed Hiccup just as he had failed her. She had failed both her children. She had failed her friends and the village. And what hurt the most was the fact that she failed herself.

As she sat, hunched over and sobbing into her hands, she didn't see the little boy on top of the staircase. The little boy whose heart was breaking... and who had made a decision that would change everything. The boy who gritted his teeth and marched back to his room, hatching a plan to end this pain once and for all.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup should have felt guilty.<p>

He was crunching through the twigs and branches on the way to Gobber's, his hands in his pockets and his teeth gritting together. He was angry, most definitely, but he wasn't guilty. On some level, he knew that some of the things he had said were wrong and warranted an apology. So why didn't he feel guilty for saying them? Why was it that all he could feel was self pity and abject fury?

Well, he thought, he was right about not being the man he was before. Old Hiccup would have felt horrible for treating Astrid that way. He would have run back and begged her to forgive him. But he didn't want to. He had a surge of... of delight. Not the kind that made him truly happy. But there was a fierce pleasure in it. In making Astrid suffer for how she had made him feel. In finally telling her what he had been thinking for weeks, that maybe they shouldn't be married anymore. He didn't want to be married anymore. He didn't even care about how that would affect the village, not to mention his children. As long as he got out, everything would be okay.

But he was supposed to feel guilty. And a part of him was angry at himself for not wanting to work things out. For letting his life crumble around him. But not one of the emotions swirling around his head and his heart was guilt. Not one of them was right. Who was he anymore?

He stopped in his tracks, turning his head toward the woods. It was dusk so the sky was darkening but he couldn't stop the sudden urge to take a hike. He thought briefly that he did, in fact, need firewood. And now was as good time as any to cut down a tree... wasn't it?

He turned on his heel and marched back to the house. He vaguely remembered that Astrid had left an axe propped against the side of the house when she wasn't using it. The kids were finally old enough to know better than to mess with it. As soon as his hand closed around its hilt, his grip became painfully tight as all the rage he had felt over the last few weeks burst through. His entire body was shaking as he walked into the woods. He could vaguely hear screaming from the house. Rather than make him feel guilty, it only made him

feel that sick delight he got from the knowledge that he had hurt his wife. That fueled his anger even more.

Suddenly, with no warning at all, he swung at a tree and left a good sized dent in its bark. It was almost like his arms had moved of their own accord. The tree in question was far too big for one family's firewood. Were he thinking logically, he would have picked a smaller one. Easier to chop down, easier to carry back, easier to chop into pieces. But this tree, this gigantic, towering tree... this tree was better. This was the one he wanted.

His arms swung again. The loud chopping noises sent birds scattering in all directions, their panicked tweeting and flapping wings irritating him, making him want to shoot them down. But first things first. He swung his axe again and dented the tree further.

"It's not my fault." he mumbled to himself. "I didn't ask for this. All this... this stuff coming down on me, this responsibility, everything that has gone wrong in the last seven years! It's not my fault."

His heart was pounding, his chest constricting. Whose fault was it? As he continued to swing the blade into the tree, his mind rushed backward, trying to cling to something, anything, that would take the blame off of him. For being an irresponsible father. For almost hating his wife. It couldn't be his fault. Astrid was wrong. It wasn't him. It was that... that anger. At himself for killing a human being. At everyone who had ever hurt him or his children.

Suddenly, the culprit, the villain, the monster who had destroyed his life popped into his head. His hands tightened more around the blade, his arms tense and shaking with fury.

"Dad." he chopped the tree as hard as he could and left yet another dent. "You did this. You did this to me. You did this to all of us." Chop. "If you had just taken responsibility for your mistake when you were a kid, none of this would have happened." He grunted as his axe embedded itself into the tree. He wrenched it out and swung it again. "She wouldn't have taken Addie, she wouldn't have told Dagur exactly how to destroy my family, she wouldn't have made it necessary for me to kill him!" He shouted in anger, his throat beginning to burn. "You brought that sick, twisted, life ruining bitch into our lives! And you didn't even stick around to pick up the pieces. No, you're off in Valhalla watching me try to fix your mistakes. You just had to die when all of us needed you the most!" the tree began to creak, its trunk making little snapping noises as it leaned.

The axe dropped from Hiccup's hand, landing on the ground next to him and instantly forgotten. He made a fist and slammed it against the tree. It groaned and leaned backward even more. An enraged cry tore from his throat as he began beating his fists against it over and over, forcing it down with his own muscles. When it finally fell, his knuckles were dripping with blood. He hardly registered the pain.

CRASH!

It was down. The mighty tree had fallen by his own hand. He was a Viking after all. All went silent as he froze, staring at the tree lying sideways on the ground. Most of its trunk was cleanly cut, but

the final bit of it, the part still connected to the fallen tree by a few tiny pieces of bark, stuck up at odd angles, snapping when he had beat it down himself.

It should have made him feel better. He had taken down his adversary. For once in his life, he had faced an enemy far bigger than he and had taken it down all by himself. But it didn't matter. Everything was crashing down around him, like trees falling in the woods, their crashes echoing in his head.

And now his head began to ache. He raised his shaking fists to his temples and pressed down. The noise in his head was incredibly loud. He wanted it to stop, his family, his dragon, his village, the pain, why couldn't it stop for just once? His fists tore at his hair as he finally fell to his knees and let out the scream that was building inside of him. It echoed in the woods, sending still more birds flying away.

Whether he had sat screaming there for minutes or hours he didn't know. By the time his voice gave out, it was dark. His throat felt like it had been ripped to pieces. He wasn't sure if it was his imagination but he thought he could taste blood. As he took a few gulps of air, he heard a faint coo next to him.

Toothless had followed him. Had he been there from the start? Had Hiccup's cries alerted him to his rider's distress? Did it really matter? He felt a surge of affection for his dragon and rested his head against the Night Fury's snout.

Toothless lay still. He had heard the voices coming from the house like thunder, feel the emotions bursting forth like torrential rain. As predicted, the storm had come. And though all was now calm, though the storm appeared to have ended for the time being, he knew that it wasn't done yet. They had sailed into the eye of the storm but it wouldn't be long before they were hit once more.

\* \* \*

><p>Gobber was half asleep when he heard the familiar knock at the door. He jerked awake and hobbled to it, not particularly wanting to relinquish his almost-nephew's daughter but feeling like it might have been best to do so under the circumstances. If only to prove to her that her parents didn't hate her.<p>

Hiccup stood in the doorway, his knees covered in dirt, his eyes blank and almost dead, and dried blood on his hands.

"What happened to you?" he asked, half genuinely concerned and half upset that he had come back hours late.

"I want Addie." Hiccup rasped.

"You're not taking her looking like that." Gobber's eyes flitted to the bloody hands. "Get yourself cleaned up before you get an infection."

"I'm fine. I want my daughter." Hiccup's voice sounded like he had been sick for weeks.

"That wasn't a suggestion, that was a command. You can take her home

when you get yourself cleaned up. Shouldn't take more than ten minutes." Gobber grabbed Hiccup's arm and dragged him into the house.

Hiccup didn't argue. He stumbled forward a bit but meekly waited for Gobber to heat some water and help him clean the blood off of his hands. When only the scabs remained, he bandaged them up. Gobber patted him on the shoulder.

"I'll wake her up." he said in a gentle voice.

Within a few minutes, a sleepy looking Adrianna, still dressed in the clothes she had worn that day, descended the staircase. Her eyes brightened when she saw her father. For a second. But as she took in his ragged appearance, her face fell.

"What happened, daddy?" she asked, her lower lip trembling.

Hiccup shook his head. "I'm just tired."

Adrianna obviously didn't believe him but she bit her lip and took his hand. Sensing that she would receive no honest explanation for the bandages on his knuckles, she refrained from comment. Fortunately for her, Hiccup's grip around her fingers was looser than it had been earlier that day. Yet, for some reason, she had a feeling that he was in worse shape than he had back then. Something about the slump in his shoulders, the tired eyes, the bandaged hands that she began to suspect covered self-inflicted injuries... something was wrong. Well, something was wrong, she knew that for sure. But it was more wrong now.

They took a few steps out of the forge before Hiccup spoke again. "We're sleeping at Poppy's old house."

All right, she thought, something is definitely worse now than it was this afternoon. "Why?"

"I just... I wanted to spend some time with you. Without your mom, okay?" Hiccup lied, feeling a twinge of guilt in the pit of his stomach that he quickly quashed.

Adrianna didn't believe him. She didn't believe a word of that excuse. It didn't explain his hands. It didn't explain his rasping voice or the dirt on his clothing. It didn't explain anything except that he was probably upset with her mother.

He didn't speak again until they had walked into the front door of the deserted house. Few things had changed. There were belongings of Stoick's that had been given to others out of necessity. But all the sentimental things stayed in place. As to why no one had moved into this particular house, it was a bit of a mystery. No one wanted to and they certainly couldn't bring themselves to demolish it. So it stood firm. Aside from a few travelers who needed lodging, it rarely hosted anyone for a long period of time.

Hiccup came to the realization that neither he nor Adrianna had any night clothes. Sleeping in their clothes from that day would have to do because he certainly wasn't going to go back to his own house just for something so mundane. Not as comfortable, perhaps, but it certainly beat his wife's cold eyes. He shivered at the

thought.

"What's wrong?" Adrianna asked, finally letting go of his hand and looking up at him with wide, slightly frightened eyes.

Hiccup got down on his knees. His heart was pounding in his ears, his hands shaking a bit as he took hers. He wanted to tell her. To spill out every little secret he had held onto for so long. How much he hated himself, how guilty he felt, how desperately he wanted to get away from Astrid... but the words wouldn't come. Astrid's words echoed in his head. Adrianna was a little girl. Too young for such a heavy burden. He would have to carry it alone.

"Addie... you know when grown-ups say that everything's going to be fine and you think they're lying just to make you feel better?" he asked, squeezing her hands tightly in his.

Adrianna nodded, her eyes still fixed on him.

"Everything's going to be fine." Hiccup said, reaching up and brushing her bangs out of her eyes.

The girl could feel tears rising to the back of her eyeballs, her heart thumping so hard she couldn't hear herself think and her lower lip trembling. Her daddy had lied to her. Granted, he had told her he was going to lie. But why would he say that to her? What wasn't he telling her? She wanted to cry. But no, crying wouldn't help. Crying would make her daddy hug her and comfort her when, really, he was the one who needed it more than she did.

"Just tell me what's wrong." Adrianna said in a low voice, her eyes pleading with him.

Hiccup shook his head. "Addie, I can't keep depending on you anymore. It's my job to be there for you when you need me. But I can't keep crying on your shoulder." his voice was shaking almost like he was about to cry anyway.

"But you can. I don't mind." Adrianna blinked a few times to push down her own tears.

"No. Not anymore." Hiccup averted her gaze, staring at her clasped hands instead.

Adrianna paused for a moment. She stared into her father's eyes, which still had a pained expression. He was hurting. Something had happened and he was not okay. And now he wasn't going to tell her what it was.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" she asked, her voice shaking with the effort to stop her tears from bursting forth.

"Yes." Hiccup nodded and squeezed her hands again. "You can give me a hug."

Adrianna didn't hesitate. She threw her arms around her father's neck and held on for dear life, like they were dangling off of a moving dragon and he was the only thing to which she could cling. In fact, it almost felt like they were suspended in midair and hurtling toward the unknown at frightening speeds.



Hiccup's heart pounded as he held her close, his breathing labored and trembling. She was all he had left. His wife hated him, his son hated him, his tribe hated him... well, his dragon didn't hate him. Adrianna and Toothless, the only two who truly loved him. To let them go would be to lose all purpose in life. It was a miracle, at this point, that anyone could possibly love him now, especially after everything that had happened, everything he had done.

Then again, his daughter wasn't named Miracle for nothing.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Blood was pouring out of what Hiccup knew would be a fatal wound. But as he watched Dagur smile in triumph, he felt a surge of rage. If he was going to die, there was only one option left. He sat up and looked his adversary in the eye.<em>

\_Dagur's eyes widened in shock. "What-"\_

"\_I'm s-sorry, Dagur..." Hiccup choked out. "But I can't let you win."\_

\_Dagur made a move to grab the dagger sticking out of Hiccup's chest, but the Hooligan quickly jerked his head and collided with the Berserker's forehead. Dagur shouted in pain and recoiled. Hiccup wrapped his right leg around the back of Dagur's left knee, pulled back, and shoved Dagur forward.\_

\_The Berserker's leg slipped out from under him, causing him to shout in shock. He grabbed Hiccup's arm, pulling him over the edge with him. Hiccup's stomach slammed painfully onto Toothless' scales and he let go of Dagur's hand.\_

\_An unearthly scream pierced the air. Hiccup was forced to watch Dagur plummet into the rocks. There was a sickening crack and then all went silent as Dagur lay there in a pool of his own blood...\_

BWAM BWAM BWAM!

Hiccup nearly fell out of bed as he abruptly became aware of his surroundings. He blinked rapidly so that his eyes would focus. What in the world...

"HICCUP!"

His heart plummeted. He knew that voice. Feeling distinctly agitated, he got up and tiptoed over to the front door.

"Addie is sleeping, what the Hel do you think you're doing waking us up at the-"

"Oh shut up! Is Finn here?" Astrid pushed past her husband and began to frantically search the room.

"No. Why would he be here?" Hiccup yawned widely and wiped his eyes but his vision seemed determined to be out of focus.

"Because he's \_missing\_, that's why!" Astrid snapped.

"How do you know he didn't just get up early?" Hiccup scratched the back of his head and registered with a grimace that he really needed to wash the sweat off of himself.

Astrid turned to look at him, her gaze terrified and, surprisingly, not contemptuous. "His window was wide open. There was a rope made out of his blankets hanging out of it."

Hiccup's heart stopped. "So... he was taken?"

"No." Astrid shook her head as she finished examining the room, satisfied that their son was not on the premises. "He ran away."

\* \* \*

><p><em>The plot thickens! I am expecting screams of outrage! Not just about Finn going missing but about all the stuff that happened before because come now, that was a lot!<em>

\_I am feeling better. Thanks for those who prayed. It's been really rough lately but I'm getting through it. I saw Muppets Most Wanted the next day and it was so funny, really lifted my spirits. I loved it and absolutely recommend it to all Muppet fans! Great way to raise your spirits!\_

\_Special thanks to \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for all the things she wrote for this chapter! We actually argued so the Hiccstrid fight would be more authentic. Sat down and threw out the comebacks and dialogue that popped into our minds. I had major feels while writing it. When we were having the mock argument, I really felt the tension. I hope that came forth.\_

\_It has also been brought to my attention that my stories are causing some people extreme emotional distress. This greatly concerns me because I kind of feel like it's manipulative. Like I know my characters and plots draw people in because I work really hard to design them that way but if it's distressing everyone that much, I need to know. And are you okay with that? I mean do you want me to keep going? Do you want me to stop? I just feel guilty is all.\_

\_Don't forget to review! I am beyond excited about your comments and opinions about this chapter in particular!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

## 5. Adventure

\_I'd like to apologize for the emotional distress some readers experienced after reading the previous chapter. I'm going to make the offer I made to my tumblr followers recently and say that any reader who really needs spoilers about something in the story to find out if they're going to be distressed or not should contact me and I will provide them. There are definitely details of this story that are under wraps but if you really need them, I'll give them. That being said, blabbing will cause you to alter my story so that the spoilers are irrelevant. I will only answer yes or no questions. Anyway, next chapter! Enjoy!\_

\* \* \*

## ><p><strong>Chapter Five: Adventure<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>There are two things everyone needs to know about Fearless Finn Haddock: first, that he never cried (crying is for <em>girls<em>). Second, he never thought very hard about his decisions. An idea would click in his mind and by golly, he was going act on it the second, nay, the millisecond that it entered.

These traits caused him to make a decision that, perhaps, he should have thought over before acting on it. The decision in question led him to do what he called the dumbest thing he'd ever done... at least until he replaced it with something dumber when he was a teenager. Finn never responded well to being punished. He was soon to discover that consequences far outweighed short term punishments.

But no little boy is thinking about consequences of his own misdeeds when he's watching his beloved mother sobbing into her hands at the bottom of the staircase after an explosive fight with his father. His parents were breaking up. His mother was completely miserable. And all his parents had talked about was Addie this, Addie that. Did they even remember that they had a second child at all?

Finn could only take so much. And at this time, his limit had finally been exceeded. It was this fight that was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. The little boy pursed his lips, gritted his teeth, and decided that he wasn't going to be a Haddock a second longer. No more worrying about being chief one day. No more fighting parents. No more being ignored because of a stupid, whiny little sister. No more feeling angry or upset. He was going to live on his own in the wilderness. It couldn't be that hard if bugs could do it. Bugs certainly weren't smarter than people!

As he tiptoed to his room, he thought about what he would take. Clothes. His wooden dragon toys. A few pieces of parchment and some charcoal. A cool rock he'd found the other day. A blanket. He lay these items on his bed and stared at them. There had to be something else he needed... oh yes. A little sand shovel. He never knew what he would dig up. And the wilderness didn't have outhouses so the shovel would serve a practical purpose as well. Always good to be practical. A little dagger was strapped to Finn's belt, mostly used to sharpen charcoal but occasionally to cut branches that got in his way while walking. That would be most helpful. As for food... he'd find berries or something.

Within a few minutes, Finn was prepared.

Throwing his items into a small satchel (which he tossed out his window), he tied his remaining blankets (and a few shirts) together and tied them to his bedpost. He tossed the end of the makeshift rope out the window and climbed down. It was dusk so there was plenty of time to get situated. He could find a cave in which to sleep. Burn some twigs he found along the way. This would be a fun adventure!

He crunched through the dead leaves and twigs and sticks, practically trembling with excitement, until he got to the ledge of a cliff. The

sun was just falling below the horizon. Finn was mesmerized by the sight. He was used to sunrises, he loved them as well, but there was something hauntingly beautiful about sunsets. Lots of red hues. Red was his second favorite color after green. He sat down on the edge of the cliff to watch the sun finally descend below the end of the ocean. He didn't want to sail too far into the sea, no matter how much he wanted to explore, because he certainly didn't want to fall off the planet! But the sunset was nice anyway. Maybe he would get used to the sight when he was living on his own.

He was about to stand up when he faced his first major setback. His boots were new, given to him only a week or so ago, and they were a bit too big for him (his parents insisted he'd grow into them but he preferred his old boots because they were brown and these were black). One of the ugly black boots slipped off his foot and hurtled toward the ocean, where it landed on the rocks with a distant splashing sound. Finn's bare foot dangled for a few moments before he fully registered what had happened. He was going to have to make himself a new shoe... or...

His mind immediately made up, he stood up and hopped on one foot until he got into the forest, where he used the branches to steady him. He wished his foot was as tough as a dragon's. They didn't need shoes. Why were humans so soft on the outside? This question became less of a random query and more of a complaint when his vest snagged on a thorny bush. He waved his arms around in an attempt to tear the vest out of the bush but only managed to cut his arms badly enough to bleed. He bit his lip against the pain (boys don't cry) and took off the torn vest, allowing it to remain in the bush while he continued to walk forward. Blood dripped from shallow cuts on his arms for a few seconds before they clotted and left some nasty looking scabs. He thought briefly that Edgar would admire them when... no. He wouldn't be seeing Edgar again. He was a... a... what was that word for someone who lived on his own? A kermit? Something like that.

His boot would be in the water under the cliff. He was nearing it when his eyes met a sight that completely distracted him. A boat. No, more than just a boat but a little less than a ship. Or were they the same thing? His Poppy told him the difference once. Or maybe that there wasn't one. Did it really matter? It was a ship-boat he had seen before. A few times in fact. Several times a year. He furrowed his brows in intense concentration for a few seconds before the answer dawned on him. Trader Johann! That was it!

Yet another completely brilliant idea entered Finn's brain and immediately required action. He didn't have to live alone in the wilderness! He could just move to a new island entirely! All he had to do was stow away in Trader Johann's boat-ship and he would be on his way in the morning. At the moment, it looked deserted so now was the best time to act. Forgetting about his boot, he hopped over to the ship-boat and immediately descended into its depths.

The twinkle of metals caught his eye first. It was very dark down there but there appeared to be a collection of furs in the far corner behind what felt like a wall of various kinds of swords. Finn nearly cut his fingers inspecting them. But the furs didn't appear to be hiding anything sharp. They were soft... very soft. So soft, in fact, that they would be a wonderful place to sleep.

Well, Finn thought, this adventure was becoming more exciting by the minute.

\* \* \*

><p>Trader Johann was many things: a traveler, a storyteller, a merchant, a rather good juggler... he was proud of his accomplishments and rather liked showing them off. But one of the things he certainly <em>wasn't</em> was a good navigator. It was that unfortunate trait, or lack thereof, that led him to Berk instead of Rune. The Ruthless Runions would surely wonder where he was but he liked Berk. He liked the pleasant demeanor of most of its residents, the Haddock family who seemed to improve with each generation, and, most of all, the amount of enthusiasm for the goods he was selling and trading. Yes, his best merchandise came from Berk.

However, the moment he docked, he was approached by several Berkians that told him that he, under no circumstances, was to stay there. Something about the Haddocks and fighting. The panicked voices nearly indicated that the Haddocks had started a war. Not wanting to walk in on a battle, the trader returned to his ship. He thought about his next stop. Rune was a day and night's travel (or two days if he decided to sleep). He knew how to get to Rune from Berk since he had made that journey a few times more than he had made the journey from Brawn to Rune, which was how he had gotten lost in the first place. As he saw it, he had two options: sleep on Berk and shove off in the early morning or sail until he got tired and then take a nap before continuing.

Rune was expecting him that afternoon. He supposed he might as well get going as soon as he could. So, after getting a quick meal with a few of the Berkians, who filled him in on the real conflict (though he simply couldn't believe that Hiccup and Astrid, of all people, were at each other's throats), he returned to his ship and shoved off. He took a deep breath as Berk grew more and more distant on the darkening horizon. It really was a nice place. Hiccup and Astrid would resolve their differences in no time. And then he would get his best merchandise once more.

What he didn't know was that the most valuable merchandise he had ever acquired on Berk was asleep in the belly of his ship. And that, with each mile he sailed, he was taking the boy on an adventure that neither of them would ever forget.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is your fault." Astrid snipped as Hiccup concluded his impromptu meeting in the Great Hall.<p>

"My fault? Addie never would have done anything this dumb!" Hiccup rolled his eyes as the Hooligan volunteers shuffled out of the Hall to search for the boy. "Looks like your suck it up and deal with it mindset wasn't so great for my son after all!"

"Oh so now he's your son?" Astrid huffed, placing her hands on her hips and giving her husband a penetrating gaze. "I'm the only one who has been putting any effort into raising him over the last two years!"

"Yeah and look how well that went!" Hiccup threw his arms up in

irritation. "Since your methods led to this, he's my son now! Soon as we get him back, I'm going to protect him from you and your idiotic ideas that pretending he doesn't have any feelings whatsoever is somehow going to toughen him up!"

"You did not just... no." Astrid put a hand up to her forehead and winced, hoping he would take the hint and leave her alone.

Hiccup opened his mouth to retort but was cut off by Snotlout and Fishlegs, who stepped between the irate couple.

"And you're not going to search for him together!" Fishlegs said in a surprisingly firm voice.

"Yeah, you'll only slow us down. Hiccup, you're with me. I need to talk to you." Snotlout grabbed the man's shirt and came close to dragging him out of the hall.

"You're with me, Astrid. Ruff and Tuff can take care of themselves." Fishlegs waited for the stragglers to walk out of the Hall before continuing. "What's going on? Really?"

"Fish, I know I've confided in you in the past and I'm not sorry I did that." Astrid said, wincing as her headache worsened. "But right now, I want to find my son."

Fishlegs opened his mouth to protest but then shut it. If it was Gunnar or Bosley missing, he'd be just as stressed as she.

He nodded once. "Understood."

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup and Snotlout were very silent as they walked through the woods in search of Berk's heir. So silent that even the sounds of twigs snapping and leaves crunching beneath their boots seemed muted. Hiccup's mind was whizzing with darker thoughts by the second. His son was missing because his wife had put some of the most ridiculous ideas into his head. His daughter was stuck with Gobber because she was too young to come on a search like this. His wife was an idiot. Life could definitely be a lot better.<p>

However, as with all facets of life, it could be a lot worse. And Snotlout wasn't shy about bringing forth bad news. After a few minutes of absolute silence, the Jorgenson stopped walking.

"What are you doing?" Hiccup growled, slowing his pace but not stopping.

"We need to talk."

"Now?" Hiccup rolled his eyes but stopped walking.

"Yes now. Before things get more out of hand." Snotlout crossed his arms.

"Well spit it out! We don't have time for-"

"First of all, you can stop talking to me like I'm one of your kids. Take yourself down a few pegs because you might be my chief, but we

are equal. Back off."

Hiccup blinked. He wasn't used to being talked to in this manner by anyone other than his wife.

Snotlout wasn't finished. "Second, I don't know what the Hel is going on with you and Astrid these days, but it needs to stop."

"Believe me, it will." Hiccup turned to continue but Snotlout stood firm.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Figure it out." Hiccup took a few steps deeper into the woods.

Snotlout jogged up to his chief and stepped in front of him. "Oh no. I don't think so. You can't honestly-" he looked around and lowered his voice just in case anyone was listening, "you can't honestly think that \_divorce\_ is going to fix this."

"So sticking with this miserable excuse for a marriage is the better option?" Hiccup hissed.

"I don't know, maybe if you got off your high horse and started being a real father and husband, things would be so \_miserable\_ now would they?" Snotlout snapped, raising his voice a tiny bit.

"Back off, Snotlout!" Hiccup shouted. "You don't know what I went through and you are in no place to judge me!"

"Too right. I'm not. \_That\_ is the issue! I shouldn't have to!" Snotlout growled back. Then he sighed and shook his head, concern taking over his features. "What happened at Brawn... It tore you up and we don't blame you. But taking it out in your wife and kids, and then your village, it's just too much!" Hiccup opened his mouth to respond but Snotlout continued. "I vowed to protect you! I vowed to stand by you! I've been willing since what happened at Brawn to stand by my chief and help him when he needs help because \_that\_ is my job!" Snotlout sadly shook his head. "But this? I can't... I can't follow this! I can't stand by this! I can't support someone who is only tearing himself apart on the inside and is taking everyone around down with him. I can't do it. I \_won't\_ do it, Hiccup."

"So why are you here?"

"I wasn't talking about Finn. I am saying that if you don't get your act together, I am no longer supporting you as my chief. And don't be so naive as to think I'm the only one."

Hiccup swallowed. So they were thinking about removing him... they were seriously \_considering\_ it. But even then... he didn't find it in himself to care. Not one bit.

He stared into Snotlout's eyes for a few silent moments. Then he shrugged. "You have the choice to stand by me or not. If you don't want to support me, fine. I don't need your help anyway. But when it comes to my choices with my own family, I certainly do \_not\_ need your advice."

"If you were anyone but my chief, I wouldn't bother saying a thing. But you are. You are tearing this village to shreds, destroying your heritage, and you don't even care! Hiccup, you don't care!" Snotlout paused for a moment, his eyes widening slightly, almost as if something new, something different had entered his mind. He sighed and lowered his voice. "And that, in all honesty, scares me! I fear for you, I fear for your kids, for Astrid, who has been a good friend to me since we were toddlers, I fear for my family and friends, how we'll be impacted by this. And then there's our village when we have to remove you from your position! Who is going to take over? What about when the other tribes hear about this? Have you even considered anything beyond your own selfish desires?"

Hiccup smirked. "You would be chief. Don't deny the fact that you have always wanted to be chief."

Snotlout shook his head. His eyes were full of sincerity as he reached up and poked Hiccup's chest. "That's where you're wrong. Once I recognized my true leader, I saw who I wanted to take orders from. I respected my father but it was hard to take orders from him. But you? I would go to battle for you! Do you know how many people would be willing to sacrifice for you and you're literally spitting us in the face for it?"

Hiccup stared back at him blankly. "Are you done?"

"No, I'm not." Snotlout snarled, the ferocity back in his voice. "I want to know what happened to the man who bravely saved this village from destruction from the Red Death, who kept his head on straight when his own daughter was kidnapped-"

"Kept my head on straight? Are you insane or did you not see me the night I went to pick up Finn?" Hiccup laughed humorlessly. "I didn't hold it together, I was a wreck the entire time and if you think that somehow makes me a better man-"

"Anyone would have reacted that way-"

"And when I shut down completely when we got her back-"

"Three days, Hiccup! You kept yourself together for three days! You didn't eat, you didn't sleep, you didn't stop moving or looking!" Snotlout pointed toward the village, "How many parents in this village would honestly, truthfully say that they could do better? The Hiccup who did all that for his child would be willing to do whatever it takes to make up with his wife and get his act together!" he growled angrily at the blank look on his chief's face. "What happened to that Hiccup?"

Hiccup stepped away and Snotlout could have sworn he saw a flash in his eyes, almost panicked. He quickly quashed it and fixed a blank expression on his face once more.

"That Hiccup is dead."

"Only if you choose him to be! You're choosing all of this for yourself and you are choosing it for your family and village!" Snotlout balled his fists and took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself before he punched the man in the face. "This little disagreement between you and Astrid is nothing but a minor spat."



"A spat?" Hiccup laughed out loud at this. "The dissolution of my marriage is a \_spat\_?"

"Compared to what you and your family have gone through and seen, yes Hiccup, it is." Snotlout internally pleaded with Hiccup to see his logic. When Hiccup's expression remained unchanged, he continued. "When it gets right down to it, you're just too busy feeling sorry for yourself to put any effort into making it better."

"You're wrong."

"Am I? I'm married. I have three kids! And I wouldn't give up over something this trivial!"

"T... \_trivial\_?" Hiccup choked and stepped away, shaking his head. "You don't get it. You're no different than Astrid, you will never understand."

"On top of that, my daughter is the same age yours was when all that happened and I know I wouldn't be able to hold it together. You know who would be holding it together and making sure she was actually found in time? Old Hiccup!"

"What?"

"Yeah, you! The old you! You'd be telling us to get up, to stop panicking and think, encouraging us every step of the way and working tirelessly to make sure she came home safe!" Snotlout shook his head, his tone now almost depressed. "I know the old Hiccup is in there somewhere. I know exactly what he would do. He would make his wife a new weapon for the next right hours and give her a heartfelt apology. He would be playing with his kids and telling them every day that he loves them. He would be proudly leading his people as his father and ancestry did before him. And best of all, he would be taking your current self and burning him at the stake! Don't deny it because he would absolutely \_loathe\_ what you have become!"

"That's where you're right."

Snotlout shook his head. "So why don't you change? You know you hate it, you know how different things could be! Why do you insist on acting like this?"

"Because it isn't acting! It's \_real\_! This is real, Snotlout! And Astrid? You give her so much sympathy, but you know what? Within two weeks of Brawn she was shoving me out the door and telling me to move on." Snotlout furrowed his brow but Hiccup continued. "I still can't get him out of my head, Snotlout. I have tried to move on, I have tried to let the past go. But I can't and that isn't good enough for her." he paused to catch his breath, placing his fingers on his temple. "I hate it. Everything. I hate that I feel this way and I hate that I want out of my marriage. But I've changed. And that's not going to stop and there's no point trying to relive the glory days because they're gone."

"Really? Gone? Then how come you still act like you around your daughter?" Snotlout asked quietly, his eyes boring into Hiccup's.

"Because she's... she's like me." he sighed. "And so help me, someone needs to not hate me."

"So that's it. You're kind to your daughter only because of what she can do for you. No wonder she's always stressed out."

"I'm there for her when no one else is!" Hiccup snarled.

"Yeah, because you need a little bit of hero worship from someone!" Snotlout snapped.

"You would do the same for Inga!"

"Not at the expense of my wife, my sons, and the village!" Snotlout growled angrily when Hiccup's expression remained unchanged. "And if you cared, truly cared, about her, you wouldn't burden her with all of your problems. You wouldn't stress her out and make her feel like she's the only one you trust. I hear her talking. We all hear her talking. Every decision she makes, she considers you first. And if it has even the slightest chance of hurting you in any way, she won't do it. The amount of times she's opted to stay home while all her friends went out to play? Did you ever notice that she only has one friend? And that she almost never goes to his house?" Snotlout sighed, knowing that this angle wasn't going to get through to his former friend. But another popped into his mind. "You know what I regret, Hiccup? I regret telling you and Astrid to your faces that I couldn't care less if Dagur had your kids. I regret that every day. But you know what, after Brawn you both forgave me. I could wallow in self pity until Ragnarok, but I don't because what is done is done. It's over. I can't change the words I said then, but I can change how I act now. It's no different!"

"IT IS DIFFERENT!" Hiccup bellowed, his face reddening with rage. "Dagur can't forgive me for killing him. The Berserker who was loyal to him, his sister, they wouldn't forgive me for that. So yeah. I'm forgiven by the people who benefited from his murder. Big deal."

"Yeah, you regret killing him, so does this mean you wished for the other option to spare yourself a single kill? He would have your kids, Astrid, our village! How many of us loyal to you would have died?"

Hiccup smirked. "You weren't loyal to me."

"We were. We were just afraid. But we planned to go down fighting if you died. I swear on my grandfather's grave."

"Then I guess you would have died." Hiccup said in monotone.

"Yeah, I guess we would have. Pity the one person who put a stop to it doesn't care." Snotlout sighed deeply and shook his head. "We all imagine it every day. What could have happened because we were the ones to be left behind. I understand your view was different. So if only you could feel the fear we felt... what could have happened... maybe then you would understand." he paused, leaving a stunned silence in his wake. After a few seconds, he continued his thought in a voice scarcely above a whisper. "I wish... gods, Hiccup, I wish you could see what would have happened. Then maybe you'd believe me."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Well now we'll never know." he turned to walk away.

Snotlout watched him before stepping away and shaking his head. "I would have followed you to the end, Hiccup. And sadly, it doesn't look that far away."

"No. It doesn't." Hiccup marched away, his foot and metal leg crunching leaves and snapping twigs.

Snotlout watched him go and he felt legitimately sorry for his friend. The hunched, stiff shoulders, the dark circles under his eyes, the way his teeth gritted together when he wasn't speaking... all he saw was a broken man that had no more optimism left to give the world and was drowning in his own sorrows. His world was crumbling around him and he was so broken by it all that he didn't even care. Snotlout was upset by many things given the current situation, but that right here had to be the worst.

\* \* \*

><p>As she stomped through the woods, Astrid thought hard about the events that had led her to this moment. Not just Finn running off, not even the fight with Hiccup or Adrianna... everything in her life that had led up to all of this. How Hiccup had caught her attention even before he managed to shoot down a Night Fury. How he had given her the privilege of being the second person to ever ride a dragon. How they had kept their relationship quiet for nearly a year before finally going public. How she had fallen completely in love with him and accepted his proposal. Their wedding day, their wedding <em>night</em> in which she had allowed him have complete control, the pregnancy that had resulted from their carelessness... everything in her life had been leading to this moment. And as she thought about every little detail that had brought her there, every single tiny event, something hit her.

She had been right. She hadn't wanted to have a baby so soon after her wedding because she feared that children would mess up their marriage. And as much as she loved both her children and could never \_ever\_ regret having them, her fears had all come true. They had, through no fault of their own, destroyed her marriage. If they had waited, perhaps Stoick would have told them about Trista in the anticipation of children. Perhaps they would have been more careful with keeping them safe, whether they were in the womb, in their playpen, or sleeping in their bedrooms. It was a miracle both of them were even alive with such incompetent parents. And now their family was going to be torn apart. This was exactly what she had feared. And it had all come to pass.

But she couldn't blame \_them\_. They hadn't asked to be conceived. They hadn't asked to lose their innocence so early. They were merely pawns in the sick game the gods were playing with their lives. She knew, without knowing how she knew it, that they would watch one or both of their children die before they did. Their protections would inevitably crumble just like their marriage.

And now there she was searching for her lost boy. The boy who had taught her how to love again, who sometimes made her so mad she wanted to strangle him, who was enthusiastic about almost everything,

who made her laugh when she felt like crying... she and Hiccup had driven him away. That was the most painful reality of all.

"Astrid!"

A jarring voice snapped her out of her reverie. She turned around to find Fishlegs inspecting a thorny bush. She furrowed her brow as he reached in and tugged out a ripped, bloody vest. Her heart stopped and her hands flew to her mouth in horror.

"It's his, isn't it?" Fishlegs asked gently. Astrid nodded. "This doesn't mean anything." he squinted at the sunlight pouring through the trees. "Let's keep going. I think there's a clearing coming up."

They marched through, both terrified of what they might find. It wasn't a clearing at the edge of the woods. It was a cliff. Fishlegs and Astrid exchanged glances before stepping close to the edge. Something tiny and black was lodged in the rocks below. Astrid got out a spyglass from her satchel and peered into the water.

There was no mistaking it. It was definitely her son's boot.

She turned to Fishlegs, tears brimming in her eyes. He put a hand on her shoulder and she collapsed into his arms, hyperventilating loudly.

"He's dead." she said in a trembling voice, clutching handfuls of the back of Fishlegs' shirt. "He m-must have gotten attacked and s-staggered up here and... and..."

He could feel her heart racing, her entire body shaking... fear had gripped her completely. Fishlegs had seen the Haddocks frightened many times and had often been a source for comfort but this time he could offer no consoling words. Instead he patted her back and hoped against hope that Finn was still alive. Unfortunately, hope was beginning to run out faster than water in cupped hands.

\* \* \*

><p>Sun shone through the boards of the boat-ship, making everything on its inside look striped. Finn thought it looked strange and spent a minute or so staring at the stripes, marveling at the effect. The boat rocked a bit more than it had at the docks so Finn knew that they must be out at sea. He had finally escaped from Berk. He was on his own and he was free. He smiled triumphantly. This was the best day of his life.<p>

He looked around at the different pieces of merchandise with which he had spent the night. He had been correct that there was a wall of swords in front of him. There were jewels and dining sets and books of all kinds (some in languages he had never seen) and funny looking herbs... this was a treasure trove! Why, he could play with anything he wanted! The cool rock he had found was nothing compared to the hunk of gold on the floor of the ship-boat. And the wooden dragon toys looked rather crude compared to some of the exquisitely carved dragons lining one shelf. There was even one of a dragon he had never seen before!

As he stood up, expecting to have a day full of quiet playtime, he heard a horrible snoring sound come from above his head. Trader Johann was asleep. This meant that the boat-ship wasn't in motion. This was probably for the best because he was going to have to move a bit and if the trader was awake, he probably would notice a disturbance. But there really wasn't any other choice because Finn desperately needed an outhouse and he knew he was going to have to improvise. It took him a few minutes of searching before he found a small hole on the wall of the boat-ship, high enough that it wasn't going to sink it but low enough that it was just going to have to do.

When he was finished, he turned around to go back to where he had slept. He hadn't considered the fact that objects shifted when they were inside of a moving ship-boat (and he had been too preoccupied with his previous mission to notice the noises). He took a few steps and tripped spectacularly on a small statue of Loki. He fell on his face, rocking the boat far more than he would have liked and making a lot of noise. Trader Johann would certainly be awakened. He only had a few seconds to curse the god of mischief for tripping him up (he could have sworn he saw the statue smirk) before the trader had descended into the ship's depths.

Finn quickly hid behind a shelf of books but he knew it was no use. Trader Johann would find him any second and his adventure would end. He bit his lip as he heard the man inspect the merchandise in search of the source of the commotion. If he was caught, he didn't know what was going to happen. But, he thought as his fist closed around the dagger on his belt, he was willing to do anything it took to avoid going back home.

\* \* \*

><p><em>No, Finn isn't thinking of murder. Of course not. I'm just saying that in case anyone freaks out.<em>

\_This chapter was literally written in the course of one day. I don't know why I put it off so much but I just didn't feel like writing over the last few days since I posted that monstrous chapter. Plus I finally got a reader who had been behind all year to catch up so I wanted to make sure this chapter would be even better to keep her and everyone else invested.\_

\_I would like to add that I was recently told that one of my characters is, essentially, a plot device. I'm not above using a minor character as one (I've done it dozens of times) but my major characters are either canon or OC's that I painstakingly create with unique gifts and talents (not to mention hours of personality and character development research). Due to a recent guest review indicating that Adrianna was being portrayed as stupid "relationship fodder," I had to really think about what I'm doing. That all being said, does anyone else agree with that assessment and are the kids developed or do they feel like they only exist to create conflict or emotional stimulation?\_

\_Speaking of guest reviews, could a guest reviewer by the name of Nelly please contact me (or provide me with a way to contact you) regarding your last review? I would like to personally address your concerns. As to others with a similar position, please contact me for minor spoilers that may or may not ease your anxiety (but at least

will have you prepared for what's to come). As I said above, only ask yes or no questions because I would prefer not to share any details as to why or how things will play out. I'm providing this option for my more anxious readers so if that's not you, you can find out what happens with everyone else!\_

\_Special thanks to \*\*EmmerzK\*\* for bunches of dialogue and to \*\*Fritz96\*\* for a few little tweaks.\_

\_Finally, I would like to deeply thank all of you who contacted me and begged me not to stop writing. You all are great and I really appreciate the support. It's because of readers like you that I pour hours of research into these stories so they're the best they can be! I have the most wonderful readers ever!\_

\_Don't forget to review!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

## 6. Weak and Worthless

\_I am so very sorry it took me this long to update! Due to some setbacks including but not limited to job issues, food poisoning, taxes, and strict parents (fortunately not mine), this chapter has had serious issues from the get go. A large chunk of the next chapter should have gone into this one but due to one of the aforementioned setbacks, it had to be postponed. This is actually a good thing because it means the next chapter will be almost entirely Finn centric. But enough about the plethora of issues surrounding this chapter, please enjoy!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Six: Weak and Worthless<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Trader Johann had done many things on his travels. He had wrestled squids, witnessed executions, delivered a baby (that was something he wasn't eager to do again), run from a gigantic pack of wild Terrible Terrors, killed a Timberjack with nothing but a three inch long dagger, and escaped pirates on more than one occasion. He loved to tell stories of his adventures, some exaggerated a bit to add a dramatic flair and others told exactly as they happened because they were so exciting they didn't need padding. But one thing he hadn't done was invite anyone else to come along with him on the way to Rune. And he could <em>definitely<em> hear footsteps in the hull of his ship. As he descended to its depths, he thought of the time he had found a little orphan girl down there. He had traveled all over the archipelago to find her a family. He still heard from her on occasion. As he arrived in the cargo hold, he made a mental note to seek her out next time he was on Brawn.

"Hello?" he called cautiously. "It's all right, I'm not going to be upset. Come on out."

There was no response. Sighing to himself, the trader began to wade through his merchandise. It was a few minutes of silent searching before he saw a glimmer of red in the far corner. He crept up to the

source, which seemed to be someone's hair, and pushed a barrel of fine wine out of the way. A pair of bright blue eyes widened as they met his.

"Fearless Finn Haddock?" the trader asked incredulously. "What on the gods' green earth are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to go on an adventure." Finn said sheepishly. "Don't make me go home, please?"

"That's up to your parents to decide." Trader Johann grasped the boy's upper arm and tugged him onto the deck of the ship. "And they're going to be mighty furious at me for kidnapping you."

"But you didn't kidnap me." Finn struggled but the older man was too strong.

"Taking the heir of a tribe, that's a serious offense. I could be executed!" Trader Johann muttered, more to himself than to the boy.

When the trader finally let go of the Hooligan heir's arm, the boy looked around at the vast expanse of ocean stretching out all around him. He was nowhere near home. This thought made his heart leap with excitement. He immediately did his best to commit every detail of this trip to memory.

"Much too close to Rune to turn back now, they're already expecting me and they'll certainly chop my head off if I'm much later." Trader Johann continued, not noticing that Finn had completely tuned him out in favor of taking in his new surroundings.

There was what looked like a shore far, far away in the horizon, Finn thought. It wasn't Berk, they had sailed far too long for that to be possible. It was a new place! A new territory! Somewhere Finn had never been!

"-just going to have to get a message to your parents as soon as possible." Trader Johann finished. Finn looked at him, not having heard much but the word 'parents' got his attention.

"Don't tell them where I am!" he cried, crossing his arms defiantly. "They don't want me at home! I want to go live there!" he pointed to the distant land.

"On Rune? My dear boy, you would be thoroughly miserable there, I guarantee it. No finer place to live than Berk. And you're the heir after-"

"Anna can be the heir. I don't want to go back! Let me stay here or go live on Rune-"

"Rune."

"-where I can take care of myself and do things my way!" Finn continued as if he hadn't heard the correction.

"I am very sorry you feel that way but I am contacting your parents the moment we set shore. I will not harbor a fugitive!" Trader Johann said firmly.

Finn huffed but the man didn't seem likely to change his mind. Some adventure this was turning out to be. Still... at least he would be able to see Rune. No harm in that, was there? Of course not, he thought.

How very wrong he was.

\* \* \*

><p>Like most people would, Fishlegs felt a bit overwhelmed as he held Astrid, who was violently trembling and doing her best not to lose it. He couldn't find it in himself to believe that Finn had actually died. Something seemed off. Yes, the bloody vest (which was *quite* *bloody*, indicating multiple injuries) and the boot floating at the bottom of the cliff might as well have been the nails in Finn's coffin. In fact, if he wasn't ever found, they might be the only things in his coffin. But something held him back from the belief that Fearless Finn Haddock had met his untimely death.

"Astrid..." he said, awkwardly patting her on the back. "Look, this is a lot of evidence but we don't have a body. And until we do, I think we should keep searching."

"R-right." Astrid took a deep, shaking breath and wiped her eyes. "Wh-where else c-can we go?"

"Maybe we can retrieve the boot. There might be more evidence on the shore." Fishlegs suggested.

Something clicked in Astrid's mind. "Okay. Let's go."

Without another word, she marched away, not bothering to check to see if Fishlegs had followed her.. Within a few minutes, she had reached a small beach near the cliff. She didn't even look back to see if Fishlegs had caught up to her before hopping from rock to rock until she reached her son's boot. She plucked it from the water and turned around.

"Astrid, what are you-" Fishlegs began but Astrid held up a hand to get him to stop talking.

Her mind raced. She wasn't sure what happened to her son, she didn't know where he was, didn't know if he was safe. But she knew that this was all Hiccup's fault and now, she knew what she was going to do next. Her feet stomped on the twigs and leaves on the ground, her teeth gritting together and her muscles tense. There was a piercing coldness in her blue eyes that would freeze a Nightmare.

She had gotten lucky. She spotted Hiccup in the village square; he had come in the vain hope that Finn had snuck back while everyone was looking for him. Astrid came charging up, nearly bowling him over when she reached him. She waved the blood covered vest and the boot in his face.

"YOU!" she shrieked, causing everyone milling about to turn and watch the couple fight. "THIS IS YOUR FAULT!"

"What the Hel are you-"



"We found this snagged in a bush!" Astrid threw the vest against his chest. "And we found this at the bottom of a cliff!" she pitched the boot at him.

Hiccup's heart sank as both objects dropped to the ground. For a moment, he was silent, his eyes conveying the terror he felt as he stared at the blood stains on his son's vest. He took a few shuddering breaths. Snotlout and Fishlegs watched the couple, both a bit too stunned to react right away. They didn't notice a crowd beginning to gather around the livid pair.

"You drove him away and so help me, if he's dead, I will never speak to you again!" Astrid shouted for everyone to hear, her face inches from his.

Hiccup snapped out of his reverie, anger driving out his fear. "Is that supposed to be your punishment? No lecture on what I did wrong? Sounds more like a reward for killing my son. And you call me sick."

"You are sick." Astrid slammed her fist into his chest but he barely blinked. "Sick and twisted and if Finn is alive, I am taking him and Anna and leaving you."

"I'd like to see you try." Hiccup hissed through his teeth.

Astrid leaned in, her eyes narrowed and her tone threatening. "Go ahead. Call my bluff. See what happens."

Hiccup laughed humorlessly and took a step back. "I became a killer for them. Who knows? Maybe the next time will be easier."

Astrid's heart stopped for a moment. She knew he wasn't serious, his tone was the same as it always was when he was bitingly sarcastic, but even for him, this was pretty dark.

Not allowing herself to react negatively to a statement obviously meant to get a rise out of her, she laughed back. "Sure you'll be able to live with it? All that guilt doubled, festering in your soul, think you'll be able to look your babies in the face and then tell them you killed another person?"

"Well it would be a terrible shame. With you gone, there would be no one to remind me of all the ways I've failed." his tone didn't change but the bitterness was evident.

Astrid rolled her eyes. If he was going to insult her in front of everyone, she wasn't going to take it lying down. "As if you aren't cocky enough."

"And you're not? Always acting so superior. And even now you're playing the victim. 'Boo hoo, my husband isn't fun anymore.'" Hiccup said the last statement in a high pitch voice that made Astrid's muscles tense. If he noticed, he didn't let on. "Pathetic."

"Oh no, you were always the pathetic one. Everyone knew it. It's a surprise Stoick dealt with it for so long." the words tumbled out of Astrid's mouth before she could stop them.

There was a gasp from the crowd that had stopped to watch them, now containing Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Svala, and Heather. Most of their friends could hear this altercation and both parents were internally glad they had instructed Erick to take Adrianna as far away from the village as possible while they sorted this out.

Hiccup choked for a second on his own words, his body trembling with rage. Finally he narrowed his eyes. "Don't you dare bring my father into this!" he growled dangerously.

"Why not? Afraid he'd be ashamed of you again?" with a snarl, Hiccup raised a hand and made a fist. Astrid watched him as he took several deep, shuddering breaths and slowly lowered it. She smirked with pleasure. "There it is. The festering can only grow so much before it's revealed." Hiccup's eyes flashed with rage but once she had started, she was beginning to enjoy herself. "Expanding your horizons, are we? Going to go home and hit our daughter? You might as well. Sooner or later she needs to see the person you've become. Her hero is nothing but a coward. It's no wonder she can't deal with her problems by herself."

Hiccup was shaking, his face slowly reddening. "I would never hurt her."

Astrid unblinkingly met his gaze. "You made the same promise to me once."

"I didn't touch you." Hiccup's fist trembled by his side but he held it down.

"No, but you didn't need to. There's more than one way to hurt someone and the gods know you broke that vow years ago. No fixing that." Astrid's smile widened as she saw her words painfully cut into him.

"Look who's talking." Hiccup snapped, gritting his teeth and begging the gods for self control.

"I have done nothing but support you and you spat in my face!" Astrid said in one breath, jabbing him in the chest with her finger.

Hiccup let out a derisive laugh. "You call that support?"

"I have let things slide." Astrid took a step forward so that she was uncomfortably close to him. He automatically moved back but she didn't break her stride. "I let your weakness permeate this marriage for long enough. Just admit it! That's all you are, have ever been, and ever will be! Weak and worthless!"

"Astrid, stop." Svala pleaded. Astrid did nothing to indicate that she had heard.

Hiccup blinked a few times, his heart pounding and his eyes burning. He begged his eyelids to contain the tears he felt forcing themselves out. His voice shook and he knew it was obvious what he was holding back. "I sacrificed everything, I put my life on the line for you and the kids! I have done more than you ever could to protect them-

Astrid burst out laughing, almost sounding like she was reacting to a

joke rather than a heartfelt statement. "Oh that's a laugh! Have you forgotten about Trista?" she put a hand on her chin, stroking it mockingly. "Oh yeah, you always bring it up. You know what? Let's talk about it! Let's talk about the broken promises I let slide!"

"Come on, Astrid, that's enough." Fishlegs made a move to separate the two but Astrid held up a hand and continued.

"You know who comforted me when our daughter was taken? Not you! You were too busy crying your eyes out and thinking only about yourself, not once remembering that she's my daughter too!" Astrid's palm pressed onto her chest in a gesture to herself as she shouted her last statement, her eyes flashed with rage from depression and heartbreak that had been long repressed.

Fishlegs took another step forward. "Astrid-"

"You don't think I would have loved a nice little breakdown? I held it together. And then, if that wasn't enough, you checked out on the whole family, the whole tribe, when your baby didn't come running into your arms the moment she was rescued! And I was silent! I had to tell Finn everything was going to be okay! I had to make excuses for you!" Astrid took a few deep breaths, her body shaking with the anger she had held back for years. Hiccup stared at her, mouth slightly agape. Finally, she continued. "And after all that, who does she run to? Who does she credit with saving her? Not me. You. And I put up with it. Because I thought she needed a hero. But I didn't know what you were."

Hiccup's stunned silence finally ended. "Why don't you get off your high horse, stop acting like I'm the only person who does anything wrong?" he waved his arms to the crowd that had gathered. "Ask them! I am a screw-up and I own up to it! They know it! I might not care deep down but I still admit that I screw up and am not good enough! But you're no better! You rant and rave, you treat people like garbage when they don't meet your expectations whether it is me, Addie or a dragon you're training!" he finally stopped waving his arms around, instead choosing to step forward and get uncomfortably close to her face. "I said it once, I will say it again, you are obsessed with perfection! Its a real shame because you are so far from perfect."

Astrid didn't break his gaze. "Oh I know. Wives are supposed to love their husbands. And all I can do is hate you."

Hiccup leaned in closer. "I hate you more."

Astrid smirked. "Impossible." they stood staring into each other's eyes, their faces so close their noses were nearly touching. Finally, Astrid shook her head and stepped back, her smirk spreading into a gleeful smile. "You know what? Since we're breaking promises left, right, and center, I have an announcement to make!" she turned to address the crowd. "Hey everyone, you know what he did when he freed Toothless? He didn't just look his dragon in the eye like all of us did when we faced dragons, no, he tried to run away and then he passed out."

Svala looked like she was on the verge of tears. "Astrid, really... stop!"

"Oh and that's not the only time he's tried to run off, no, if I hadn't stopped him, he would have taken Toothless and flown off when we were fifteen!" Astrid turned to face her husband again, a grin of triumph on her face.

Hiccup gritted his teeth, his face reddening slightly. "I could share some deep dark secrets of yours too\_.\_" he threatened, fists balled at his sides.

Astrid rolled her eyes. "Go ahead. I have nothing to hide."

"Really? So it's okay if I just yell out for everyone to hear that you hated our kids before they were born?" Hiccup turned to face the crowd, not bothering to keep his voice down. "And let's not forget the time you killed your brother!"

Something inside of Astrid snapped. With a livid roar, she ran at full speed at her husband and tackled him to the ground. His head slammed against the dirt, momentarily causing him to see stars before he faced her.

He let out a derisive laugh. "You always did have to be on top."

Astrid raised her fist and slammed it into Hiccup's jaw. He continued to laugh as blood dripped from his lip.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Snotlout bellowed, seizing Astrid's shoulders and lifting her off her husband.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut bounded forward and helped their friend yank her off of Hiccup. She continued to struggle against them, kicking and punching everything she could reach, but their combined strength overpowered her.

"If my baby is dead, I will kill you with my bare hands!" she shrieked as they dragged her away.

Hiccup slowly stood up, his whole body trembling and his hand wiping blood off his chin. "Oh, you won't have to." he muttered so quietly that only Fishlegs, who was standing rather close to him, was able to hear.

It took Fishlegs a while before he could make his muscles move again. As he and Hiccup watched their friends drag a screaming Astrid away, he stepped forward and put a hand on the Hooligan chief's shoulder.

"Hiccup, I'm sorry. I didn't know she was... you two need help." he said softly.

"No help can fix this." Hiccup said in a dead voice, his eyes never once leaving his wife. Suddenly, as if he had made a rather abrupt decision, he turned around and stepped out from under Fishlegs' hand. "Keep searching. I'll be back."

"Hiccup-"

"Keep searching!" Hiccup snapped, his voice becoming rather

dangerous. "I don't want to hear your voice or see your face again today unless you have my son."

Fishlegs watched his friend stomp away, his heart rate accelerating and praying that Hiccup wasn't as broken as he was beginning to suspect. Though judging by the slumped shoulders, the tears brimming at the corners of his eyes, and the anger in his voice, the burly Hooligan knew that his chief was probably worse off than anyone ever imagined possible.

Hiccup didn't go into the records building very often. There was a copy of the law books in the Great Hall, which also contained the Dragon Book. Once in a while he would venture in to read a story book but that was long ago. With two children, he simply hadn't had the time. Why, the last time he was in there was to get his marriage forms. Paperwork wasn't very important to Vikings but they did like to have things like marriages, births, and deaths recorded for future reference. However, the Hooligan chief sought a different kind of form entirely.

"Come on." he muttered to himself, opening drawers at random. "You've got to be around here somewhere." "

Curse the organizational skills of the old records keeper. No one had understood it when she was alive and when she died, no one tried to correct it. In fact, they hadn't had a records keeper in two years. Hiccup thought vaguely that they should get someone else to at least go through everything and figure out a new system so that he could find something more easily. Then again, what he sought wasn't used very often.

And then, in the fourth drawer he checked, he found them. The slips of parchment that would fix everything. He pulled them out, a small smile on his face. There were only three other copies of them left in the drawer but then again, they were rarely used. He couldn't remember the last time someone had needed them.

"Right, let's see." he said through his teeth as he rifled through them.

They were pretty standard. He could have them filled out within a few minutes. The real challenge would be making Astrid fill them out. But he didn't think it would take much persuading. Not with the argument they'd just had. She'd probably be just as enthusiastic about signing them as he was.

As he stashed them in a pocket in his flight suit, he paused for a moment. Was this really what he wanted? There was a reason these papers were rarely used. He bit his lip for a moment, his mind reeling.

"I let your weakness permeate this marriage for long enough. Just admit it! That's all you are, have ever been, and ever will be! Weak and worthless!" "

Yes. This was exactly what he wanted. He closed the pocket in his suit over the divorce papers. Though on the outside he surely looked purely angry, he knew by the tight constriction in his chest that words could oftentimes hurt more than the sharpest sword. And right now, he felt as if all his heart and soul had been torn to shreds.

Nothing could compare to the pain he felt... the pain he hid. Horribly enough, there was only one thing he could do about it. But even worse was the all too real fact that, in his feeble attempt to squelch the pain he was suffering, the agony he so despised, he was ripping his family to shreds in the process... and he didn't care.

\_He didn't care.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Well I guess it's the beginning of the end of Hiccup and Astrid's marriage. It's unfortunate that their disagreements have gotten this bad but that's life sometimes.<em>

\_Special thanks to \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for helping me with the argument and to \_\_\*\*Fritz96\*\*\_\_ for some minor edits. And a very special thanks to the tumblr user named \_\_\*\*animationrulezz\*\*\_\_ for being a temporary beta and adding some good suggestions.\_

\_Due to the recent discovery that there are guests who have been silently following me for a very long time, I would like to ask all of them to do me a quick favor and leave me a review telling me how long you've been reading my work (if you can't remember the date, just put down how far I was into the story you were reading when you started reading it). I ask this mainly out of curiosity. I really want a rough estimate of how many readers I actually have. Of course, if you have any comments about this chapter or this series (or my other work) in general, don't hesitate to leave them!\_

\_As for everyone else, don't forget to review and I'll see you in the hopefully less complicated next chapter.\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

\_P.S. Okay guys, you've driven me to do this. I'm going to have to post a major spoiler about this story because my readers are dropping like flies.\_

\_If you don't want the ending of this story spoiled for you, stop reading now.\_

\_I mean it.\_

\_Don't read this if you don't want a major plot point spoiled.\_

\_I'm putting spaces here so no one accidentally reads it.\_

\_Okay guys, here it is:\_

\_Yes. Hiccstrid will reunite. And the scene when they see each other after the Finn ordeal? Beautiful. Absolutely the best ending for that little plot point possible. It would have been really wonderful to have you all wondering if they would break up only to throw out that, honestly, incredibly happy ending. But now it will be no more.\_

\_Seriously, it's killing me to even post this but I really hate losing readers. As a result, a scene that was going to be emotionally distressing already will be getting an edit. I won't say any more on

that subject.\_

\_I'm kind of hurt that I've been driven to post this. But I guess if it means I won't lose all of you, it's necessary.\_

\_Excuse me, I'm going to go cry over your lack of faith in me.\_

\_Okay not really.\_

\_But I am a teeny bit hurt.\_

\_Those of you posting reviews who don't want a spoiler, I am very very very very sorry.\_

\_And if I sound like a brat, again, I'm sorry. I was just really looking forward to surprising you. It's a major disappointment.\_

## 7. Deceiver

\_Thank you all so much for the kind words and encouragement. I really needed them because I had a rough week. It started with food poisoning and went downhill from there! So to everyone who is willing to stick with me until the end... you are wonderful. I wish I could thank each and every one of you individually but I don't want to spam you. Anyway, onwards to the next chapter!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Seven: Deceiver<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>There was only one word that could describe Finn as Rune came into view: excited. The young Haddock stood bouncing on his heels toward the prow of Johann's ship, watching with bated breath as the island grew larger and larger. Finn jumped a bit when a hand clapped his shoulder. He looked up at Johann with parted lips.<p>

"Stay close, lad. Can't have you getting lost on the island of Rune."

Finn faced forward with an eye roll. Johann didn't notice this blatantly disrespectful action as he had already walked toward the stern. Grownups were so annoying, so \_frustrating\_. This was his first big adventure outside of Berk with no parents breathing down his neck and no little sister whining about safety hazards and what "daddy would say". Can't a kid live a little? He could handle himself! Sheesh.

The closer the ship got to the docks, the more Finn began to see. The setting sun cast an orange hue across the skies as the earth began to darken, but he thankfully had very good eyesight. He began to see people milling through the streets beyond the docks, but no one seemed to flock to the ship like people did on Berk. This was very strange to Finn, but maybe there were less children here or something. Or maybe the adults here were even worse than back home! Oh, if that were the case then he would beg for Johann to turn around

before even docking.

Johann finally docked the ship an agonizing five minutes later. Finn ran from one side of the ship to the other in order to catch all the sights and take in as much information as possible. Johann glanced at the boy now and then, surprised when he could see a small Hiccup at first glance. He smiled at the thought but it quickly faded upon reminder that the Haddock family wasn't currently doing well. "\_Oh yes"\_ , Johann thought to himself presently. "\_I need to get that message to Berk as soon as possible."\_

Johann leaped onto the dock and tied his ship down, leaving a wary eye on the child who began to climb over the edge of the ship to join him on the dock. "Here lad," Johann reached out a firm hand. "Give me your hand." Finn scowled, unwilling to accept help from an adult. But the sight of the slapping waves six feet below and the churning water which was surely cold, he gripped Johann's hand and jumped to the dock.

"There we are," Johann sighed, fixing Finn with a firm gaze. "Now, Master Finn I need to send a message to your parents and I need to locate a Terrible Terror in order to do so. You will come with me and you will stay with me, and under no circumstances are you to wander off alone. Understood?"

Finn glowered, crossed his arms and remained silent.

Johann crossed his own, hardening his gaze in what he hoped was not a bargaining expression (as per usual). If he lost Finn, Hiccup would surely kill- No, \_Astrid\_ would surely kill him. Hiccup would be righteously upset but to think of a chief's wrath for kidnapping his only son and heir, and then to LOSE said only son and heir? Johann shivered at the thought. Finn's lip lifted in a smirk as if he heard these thoughts spoken aloud. Thor, he so looked like Astrid sometimes.

"Understood?" Johann pressed.

Finn finally shrugged. "Fine."

"Good lad. Now let's go." Johann turned on his heel and marched up the docks. Finn walked at his hip, thankful he didn't need to run to keep up. His father was tall and the rare times Finn had to accompany him, he had to-

NO. No, he needed to stop thinking about his parents, \_especially\_ his father. He didn't want to think about him ever again. To distract himself from thoughts of home and family, Finn looked around.

There was something about Rune that seemedâ€¦ off. He couldn't place it but there was definitely something that seemed strange. People milled about with their sheep and yaks like on Berk. The houses were shaped more square and with less dragon carvings and statuettes. Finn knew Berk was beautiful, but Rune was gorgeous. He could see mountains in the distance with forests before it and lush green fields. In the village there were trees and flowers planted in various places. But no matter how beautiful the landscape was, the people were not. Most people wore grey and brown clothing, and no one seemed to smile here. Rune seemed to clash a bit, like it wanted to be rich but the people just couldn't keep up with the beautiful



scenery.

And then it hit him. Children. Each direction Finn searched with wide blue eyes for a child his own age, he saw none. He saw one boy a little older than himself walk hand in hand with his father, but Finn could tell it wasn't a simple walk. The father held his boy's hand tightly in his and their stride matched in quick, fluid steps to their destination. They didn't look one way or the other as they went nor did they look back. They kept their eyes on their destination and, as soon as they arrived, slammed the door quickly behind them.

Concerned, Finn trotted after Johann. People's eyes fixed on him as he ran, wide and fearful. Johann didn't seem to notice the boy's lagging behind as he walked, muttering to himself about finding a Terror. An old frail woman grasped Finn's arm and pulled him aside. Finn yelped at the sudden pressure and the wide gray eyes that stared into his own.

"Hey, let go!" Finn tugged, but the elderly woman held fast.

"Better get yourself inside quick, young man. You know the rules." The woman said through chapped lips. Finn grimaced at the sight of missing teeth and stench of stale breath. He wrenched his arm from her grasp and ran after Johann.

Finn turned the corner and halted, dust swirling at his heels. "Joh-" He paused, looking around with wide eyes for a moment. The street branched off into four adjacent lanes. He didn't see or hear Johann in any particular streetâ€¦ which should he choose?

Finn began to choose the far left lane when he stopped himself. A large grin began to spread on his face and he laughed. Why did he want to find Johann? He wanted to be alone and free, right? Johann was only obsessed with finding a Terrible Terror to send a letter to Berk to his parentsâ€¦ Ohhh, they would surely be coming soon to get him thenâ€¦ to take him back there. To the "home" that was only a building full of anger and tears and yellingâ€¦ He couldn't go back to Berk. He couldn't! He would give anything to never go back to Berk again.

So he turned to the far right lane, hoping he wouldn't run into Johann by accident. He was small and fast though; he could easily hide from Old Johann in a village so big. So the Runian kids didn't run around to play like his friends did. So what? He was just used to things looking so nice all the time. Rune would soon look just as beautiful as Berk, he was sure of it.

Finn ran through the streets, looking for anything interesting to explore. The few people he ran into gave him a wary eye. Another man hissed another warning to him as the old lady had. What was everyone's problem? His father had established a night curfew for children for safety reasons, but it wasn't even dark yet! If Rune turned out to be more strict than Berk, then maybe he should try to find a small dingy and sail to another island. In that case he would need to find himself a map, a compass, a satchelâ€¦ The young Haddock gazed up at the darkening sky, soon realizing he would need to find a good place to sleep as well. The rumbling in his belly reminded him of dinner and then his parched throat decided it was time to complain. Gee, living on his own was harder than it seemed. And he

still only had one shoe.

\* \* \*

><p>Five hours later, Finn was nowhere to be found. Even Hiccup was beginning to wonder if something had happened to his son. How could Finn have simply escaped? Had he taken a dragon? Something in the young father's gut told him that his son wasn't dead. But it was still tense. Finn hadn't died but he still needed saving.<p>

Then again, his children always needed saving, Hiccup thought with a scowl. He began to wonder if he would ever be able to breathe freely. One more thing to worry about and this one would never go away. As he sauntered back to the Great Hall, slightly breathless and covered in sweat, he caught sight of his wife, looking every bit as tired as he was. She seemed to have calmed down a bit. Good.

"Astrid, we need to talk." he said, bounding up to her with a blank expression.

"I don't think so." Astrid snapped.

"I'm not going to fight. I promise. I just need a few minutes." Hiccup sighed deeply. "Please."

Snotlout looked between the couple with a critical eye. "If I hear shouting, I'm coming in."

Hiccup and Astrid nodded and walked to the back of the Hall where no one could hear them. Most were still out looking for Finn so the Hall was mostly deserted.

"What did you want?" Astrid asked him, her eyes fixed on a point above his left shoulder instead of his eyes.

"Same thing as you." Hiccup reached into his pocket and pulled out the papers. He slammed them down in front of his wife. "To get out."

Astrid looked down at the papers, taking in the black letters spelling out the one word that had been on her mind for weeks: DIVORCE. She took several deep breaths, now clutching the table with both hands. Her heart pounded. Was this what she wanted? What did she want? Why did Hiccup have to spring this on her while she was worried about Finn? Why did he do any of the thoughtless, cruel things he had done?

Panting, she slowly licked her lips. "Hiccup-

"What, you want to back out of this now? You want to change your mind now?" he responded, his voice wrought with anger but quiet.

"Don't... don't you think we can work this out?" she asked in a small voice, praying that just a tiny piece of her Hiccup would emerge, even for a moment.

Hiccup stared at her with a hardened expression. "No. I don't."

Astrid felt rage flare up once more but she quashed it. Her eyes prickled with tears; her hands began to shake slightly so she tightened them against the table.

"Hiccup please-"

"What? Please what? What do you want me to do?" Hiccup snapped, keeping his voice down so that no one would interrupt them. "To be completely honest, I can't do anything but this. Because this, us, isn't working."

"I want you to come back!" Astrid cried as quietly as she could in just as pleading a voice. "I want you to stop being this and come back, help me find Finn-"

"Oh I'll help you find Finn but I already told you the man you want is dead. So stop asking." Hiccup growled.

Astrid took a shaky breath. "I love him. I will always love him. But this? No one could love this."

"You're right. You're absolutely right." Hiccup shoved the papers forward and almost threw a piece of charcoal at her. "So what are you waiting for?" he phrased it like a question but he almost sounded commanding.

"The Hiccup I married is stronger than that. You are not dead, no matter how much you want to-"

"Oh really?" Hiccup smiled spitefully and picked up the charcoal. "Would he do this?"

Astrid watched, as though in a trance, as the body of the man she loved containing the soul of the man she hated sign the bottom of the page and slide the papers at her. She stared down at his name, written in his usual handwriting... a name she had come to see as a comfort now resting at the bottom of a petition for divorce. Solid proof that her Hiccup, the man she still loved with all of her heart, was long gone. By the time she looked back up, Hiccup had already turned and began to walk away.

Step thunk. Step thunk.

A noise that had once brought her joy was now agonizing to hear. She wanted to block it out. She turned back to the paper but she couldn't concentrate.

Step thunk.

She needed to think about this.

Step thunk.

This was a huge decision. She placed her hand on the charcoal, staring down at the name on the paper.

Step thunk.

A name, like that sound, which made her want to reach into that

horrible man and pull out the remnants of her first and only love. If only to bury them.

Step \_thunk\_.

It wasn't supposed to end this way. She had loved him for a little over half her life. She had given birth to his children, stuck by him in his darkest moments. But not \_this\_ moment, the darkest of them all.

Step...

She couldn't take this anymore. She picked up the charcoal and placed it on the paper.

...\_thunk.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Since Finn was distracted by deep thoughts on his future plans, he didn't notice the tall man wrapped in vibrant clothing step out from a nearby building. He paused mid-step with a curious smile, watching Finn silently wave his hands around at his sides while he mentally tried to come up with a plan.<p>

"Hello young man," the adult smiled warmly at the boy, making him spin around on the spot. "Are you lost?"

Finn eyed the man suspiciously. "What makes you say that?"

The man chuckled. "You're a feisty one aren't you? Come now, what's your name? Maybe ole' Javan can help you."

Finn continued to stare at the man, drinking in his odd appearance. He wore brown baggy trousers and had money bags tied to his belt. He also wore a purple shirt underneath a brown colored vest with bronze buttons. All in all, he didn't look very Viking. And his accent was thick and strange, one the boy had never heard the likes of before.

Javan sighed. "At least let me give you a hot meal. Obviously you have no home to go to or you would surely be there by now."

Finn's eyes narrowed. This man was smartâ€¦ or his own destitution was that obvious. He didn't look to be a bad person at all, in fact he seemed rather wealthy. Wealthy people were always nice, not to mention his parents. Well, they were usually pretty nice to everyone anyway. Nobody was perfect. But at any rate, what was one meal with a guy who was offering? He wouldn't need to stay with Javan for long. He knew he would figure out a solid plan in time, but he couldn't honestly decline a good man's offer of free food.

The boy finally sighed. "Sure. One meal. Then get lost. I don't need any help."

Javan laughed out loud. "Sure thing, squirt."

"Don't call me squirt!" Finn growled as he walked beside the man down the street. His father called him that sometimesâ€¦ he absolutely despised that nickname now.

Javan kept on smiling. "Well I do need to call you something. How about Red?" he gently tousled Finn's hair in return.

The boy slapped his hand away. "Finn. My name is Finn."

"Finn. Good strong name." Javan nodded in appreciation. "So where are your parents?"

Finn scoffed. "I don't need parents. I'm living on my own from now on." The boy noticed a few adults whispering in a doorway, one woman pointing a finger at them in earnest. Her husband grabbed her wrist and pulled it down with a loud hush. Javan continued before he could comment on the suspicious behavior.

"It's a big world out there. Lots of adventures to be had. I agree that parents only hold you back."

"Exactly!" Finn nearly shouted. Finally someone who understood! "All they do is fight and argue about the dumbest things. My sister gets all the attention. And my dad's always busy so he is never home. So when he is he's a complete grump!" Finn continued on his rant for another five minutes. He kicked stones with his boot as he spoke, not paying attention to where Javan was taking him.

Before long he noticed the sound of waves lapping against the docks. His eyes caught sight of a giant vessel docked close by. "Wow!" Finn's eyes widened in amazement. "Is that your ship?" Berk didn't have any ships that big!

Javan laughed jovially. Patting his back, he ushered him towards the stairs. "It is, my boy! Inside I have us a hot meal and warm bed for you to stay the night. You'll be on your way in the morning."

Finn grinned up at the man, excited that he had met such a wonderful man. Javan understood him within just a few minutes and even offered him food and shelter! He didn't plan on staying with him but maybe he would reconsider.

Finn boarded the ship first and stopped on the dock while Javan climbed aboard after him. A group of twenty men milled the ship, performing their various duties. But as soon as Finn boarded the ship, each turned to stop and stare at him with evil, toothy grins. Finn took a startled step back. These men didn't look very nice. Not nice at all. His back bumped into Javan's stomach.

Javan wrapped his fingers around his upper arm. "Here we are, ma boy. Welcome to the!" Javan paused, leaning to the closest ship mate. "Which ship is this?"

"The Bloody-" the mate stopped with slack lips. "You don't know?"

Javan waved a hand. "Eh whatever."

Finn turned to look up at him. "Wait! I thought you said this was your ship!"

Javan's amiable smile turned to a malicious grin. "No, boy. It's not." Javan jerked his chin and Finn was suddenly seized by three

men. They smelled of grime and sweat, their hands grabbed his arms and back hard enough to bruise.

"Let me go! Why are you doing this?" Finn screamed through his struggles.

Javan tilted up his chin with a single finger. "You really are a clueless little boy, just like the rest of them. You left home because your family didn't love you. Well guess what, boy? Adventure? It's a myth! The best thing you have coming for you is the clothing on your back. You have nothing now, slave!"

Finn's eyes widened. No! no no no, that couldn't mean! NO!

"WHAT?" Finn writhed in the tight grasp. Javan laughed again, stepping back.

"That's right, boy. You're a slave now. Good strong boy like you should go for a lot of money. You'll be an investment, young enough to train and old enough to know better than to try to run away. Or you'll suffer the consequences." Javan chuckled. "You wanted to travel, didn't you, lad? Your wish it about to come true."

"What- no! Javan NO! You CAN'T do this! I'M THE SON OF A CHIEF, YOU WON'T GET AWAY WITH THIS!" Finn's voice echoed through the belly of the ship as he was dragged down the stairs. Javan had long disappeared from view but he still threw his weight into every struggle, swing and punch he could muster. His throat began to crack at the force of his screaming. Finally, one of the slave traders had enough.

"SHUT UP, YOU LITTLE BRAT!" The burly man backhanded Finn across the face with his fist with a force that knocked him off his feet. The back of the boy's head slammed into a wooden crate and darkness overtook him. The last thing he heard was the dark chuckles of the slave trade.

\* \* \*

><p><em>And now the plot thickens!<em>

\_Well you have \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ to thank for most of this chapter seeing as I am a freeloader who takes advantage of superior writers. Not really, I just feel like one when she ends up writing most of my chapter. As my tumblr followers know, I have been having a very bad week and the sudden decrease in readers thanks to the previous chapter was not helping things. I'm a very sensitive person and it hurt. Especially since that all came at the same time as complaints about Adrianna being under-developed. The good news is that I've actually come up with a few ways to fix that and now she's almost more developed than Finn!\_

\_At this point, if you want to quit reading, feel free. I am deeply thankful to those who are staying. And especially thankful for the tumblr plug I got for \_\_Unexpected\_\_ this week!\_

\_I wrote a short story about how Hiccup started calling Adrianna "Addie" and I posted it to my tumblr (same username as here). If you can't find it and want to read it, PM me. It's very fluffy and

definitely "old Hiccup" as opposed to this jerkface I've been writing. Also any guests with questions need to provide contact information or I can't answer them. And I really do try to answer all questions.\_

\_I should probably end this now. Don't forget to review and thanks for sticking with it! I love you all! Sorry I'm kind of snippy right now. Long week.\_

\_Happy Easter!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

## 8. Sold

\_Hey there! I decided to actually write this chapter myself. Or at least try to. For some reason, this story isn't coming to me as easily as the others. I'm having a really rough time with it, especially now. I will warn you that absolutely nothing in this is going to be historically accurate because I don't feel like doing a whole bunch of research but I'm going off what I've seen on TV or in movies and just taking it from there.\_

\_Also, fun fact, this is one of those chapters that wasn't as well planned out and one of the scenes I never intended to write in the first place but I'm glad I did!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Eight: Sold<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Trader Johann was so eager to get word back to Hiccup and Astrid that he had Finn that he scribbled out the note as he walked and tied it to the first Terrible Terror he found (after feeding it Berkian dragon nip, of course). He then turned back to speak to his stowaway.<p>

"Well, my boy, we should get back t-"

He found himself talking to no one at all. The young boy had apparently gotten lost in the crowd. His heart thumping, the trader immediately began running into the groups of people, calling Finn's name over and over. But the boy was long gone. He looked back in the direction of the Terrible Terror he had sent but it was too far away to summon.

His only hope was that Hiccup and Astrid would come soon because if they didn't... he shuddered to think of what would happen. He prayed for a speedy flight there... and for mercy on himself.

\* \* \*

><p>The back of Finn's head ached horribly and for a few seconds, he wished he was still out cold. The darkness was penetrating, even when he opened his eyes. He was dizzy but unsure if it was his perception or if the ship was really rocking and spinning around him. He suspected that it was a bit of both and he was beginning to feel

nauseous. The only light he could see was coming through the boards of the ship. Unlike Trader Johann's ship, the light barely went through it so for all the good it did him, he might as well have kept his eyes shut.<p>

It was a few seconds before he noticed that he was standing upright even though he had been lying down when he fell unconscious. He tried to move his arm but felt something obstructing the motion. A metallic clink. Gritting his teeth, he tried to free his wrists from his binds but he was no match for the heavy chains. He felt shackles on his feet as well. This was nauseating because every time the ship moved, he was forced to sway with it. He didn't have anything to hold onto so he had no choice but to stand upright.

"Hello?" he rasped, his voice still sore from his screaming however long ago it was. "Is someone down here?"

No response. Was he alone? He couldn't see anyone but then again, it was far too dark to know for sure if he was alone. He trembled in fear but held back his tears. He \_wasn't\_ going to cry.

"P-please..." he whined. "I j-just want to g-go home."

"Jus' keep yer mouth shut." came a low voice from a point to his right.

"Who are you?" Finn turned to look but he could see nothing but darkness.

"Better yeh don't know." the voice replied. "Seein' as we're jus' gonna be sold. We don't make friends."

"But I c-can't be sold. I have p-parents." Finn whimpered.

The man laughed bitterly. "Not anymore, yeh don't."

Finn felt a tightening in his chest. He shouldn't have left home. Admittedly, his parents hated each other and his sister was annoying but at least he had friends. And a bed to sleep in. And food to eat.

"What's gonna happen to me?" Finn asked after a few minutes of deep breaths, trying to hold back his tears.

"Yeh work. Do what yer told." the man replied nonchalantly. "Sometimes they let yeh go free. But mos' of the time they don't. Now stop askin' questions and jus' be quiet."

Finn complied, though he had about a million questions left. He thought of his parents. Would they be worried? They would be if they knew where he was, that was for certain. But they didn't.

That when panic began to set in. No one knew where he was. \_No one was coming.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>It was dark. Too dark. A blurred shape blocked the moonlight, pressing a cloth up to the little girl's mouth before she could make



a sound. The girl tried to scream but found herself far too groggy to do so. She couldn't move her limbs so she lay helpless as the shape in the shadows wrapped her in her own blankets and had a large, dark shape lift her with what felt like its teeth. She wanted so desperately to struggle and cry for help but the whole world was spinning and her arms and legs wouldn't move. Her daddy always came when she needed him so, as she felt her body rise hundreds of feet over the village, she hoped that maybe he would come anyway.<em>

\_But he didn't. And now she was completely alone in the dark. Alone in the hands of a stranger whose hate for her radiated from above the dragon (at least she thought it was a dragon). She knew no one was going to rescue her. She opened her mouth in a silent scream...\_

Adrianna woke up with a squeak. She was soaked in sweat and her heart thudded in her ears. For a split second, she wanted to go get her daddy. And then she remembered she wasn't at home.

Her heart thumped harder when the events of the previous night returned to her. She hadn't seen her brother all day and all anyone would tell her was that he had run away. Her parents hadn't even been able to look her in the eye when they had come to talk to her that evening. They wouldn't give their daughter any details except that her brother was still missing but hopefully they would find him soon. But Adrianna could tell from her mother's tone that hope was running out fast.

Her father's lips twitched upward in a tiny smile when he caught sight of her but she noticed his eyes intentionally averting those of her mother. She didn't know why this was. And, as usual, no one was going to tell her.

And now she was alone. Alone in a house full of people. She loved Erick's parents but she hardly knew his brothers and sisters. Gustav no longer lived with the family so she was sleeping in his old bed, which had been pushed into Erick's sisters' room. Magnus and Aud were fast asleep. She didn't like the Larson girls much. Magnus was over twice her age and spent an awful lot of time mockingly calling her and Erick a romantic couple, and Aud was very popular with the village girls so Adrianna almost never spoke to her. About the only good thing she could say about the two of them was that they didn't snore. But it was pointless trying to go back to sleep now.

Adrianna sat up and thought about her options for a few minutes. Ordinarily, she would have gotten up to speak to her father. But she couldn't do that now. He was probably still out looking for Finn. Her second choice would have been Erick but her best friend was still asleep and she didn't want to wake him. So she was faced with a night of lonely contemplation.

She got up as quietly as she could, careful to avoid the creaky floorboards. It didn't take her long to descend the staircase and emerge into the main room of the house. She knew that Erick's parents now slept on the lower floor so she was still going to have to be quiet. She briefly considered setting a fire and washing her face off. But the smell of smoke might alarm the Larsons at this time of night. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes and tried to wipe the sweat off her brow. She only succeeded in soaking her nightdress's

sleeve.

And then an entirely new feeling overtook her. Jealousy.

Erick's family never lost anyone. The parents never fought. The siblings got along. Erick wasn't as stupid as she was. He had learned to read just fine. So why couldn't she? And why was she gripped with paralyzing fear almost every night? And why did no one, not one other child, understand what she was going through? Why?

She was surprised at how quickly and suddenly these emotions overcame her. What was more surprising was that they wouldn't go away. They had festered below the surface a bit when she would watch other kids run and play freely while she was nervous about taking risks. But she didn't let them consume her. Why was it different now?

Oh yes. Because her father was always close by. And her parents didn't used to hate each other so much. But now even those who had kept her sane all of these years were letting her down one by one. Like Poppy, when he had so abruptly left. She couldn't trust anyone. Not anymore. Not even herself.

She stood at the entrance to the main room of the Larsons' house for a very long time, the emotions beginning to penetrate every barrier she'd erected to keep herself from succumbing to them. Now that they had... she didn't know what to do. She didn't even know what she wanted to do. This was new. This wasn't the sweet, compassionate little girl she knew. It was an angry, bitter child, a child she didn't even know emerging from the shadows of her own heart. And now that it was out, she couldn't banish it. She felt it running rampant in her mind, reminding her of everything that wasn't fair. And there was a lot of unfairness in her life. Too much.

And that made her angry. It wasn't right. None of it was right. It wasn't supposed to be this hard. If it was, all the other kids would have fears too. Fearless was in Finn's name and even when he had broken his ankle, still he gritted his teeth and dealt with it. Within three months, he was back to jumping off rocks and climbing trees.

But that wasn't her. She had spent the first eight and a half months of her life with Finn. Why did he get all the fearlessness while she got all the... well... weakness? It wasn't because she was a girl. Her mother wasn't weak or stupid. It wasn't because she didn't have anyone brave or admirable in her life. She had more heroes than she could count and she was the daughter of the strongest man in the entire world.

So what was wrong with her?

"You all right?"

A sudden voice violently startled her. She emitted a small squeak of surprise but was relieved when she spotted Erick's father rolling out of his bedroom.

"I... I'm sorry, I'll go back to bed." she stammered.

"Don't worry about it. No sense in lying there for hours if you can't

sleep." Olaf Larson chuckled, rolling closer to her and lighting a candle. "I understand the feeling myself. Though I hardly think it's for the same reason."

Adrianna watched him suspiciously, almost like she thought he might be an imposter. Olaf leaned back a bit in his chair with wheels, watching her with a warm gaze that soon melted her defenses. She relaxed a bit and strode forward, seating herself on their couch. Olaf wheeled next to her and lit a fire in the pit.

"What's on your mind?" he asked amiably.

"Nothing." Adrianna answered automatically.

"Really now?" Olaf turned to look at her, the small fire now flickering and casting odd shadows on his face. "Nothing at all? I hardly think that's the case. Smart kid like you's got to be thinking about a thousand things at once."

Adrianna shook her head. "I'm not smart."

"Well now, why would you go and say a silly thing like that?" Olaf chortled, shaking his head as though she had told him the stupidest joke in the world.

"Just 'cause I am. It doesn't matter." Adrianna propped her elbows on her knees and placed her chin on her hands.

"Of course it does." Olaf turned his soft brown eyes to Adrianna's sharp green ones. "Because if that's true, my Erick is a liar."

Adrianna's head snapped up. "What?"

"Well isn't it true you play together a lot?"

Adrianna raised an eyebrow. "Yes..."

"Well he says he likes spending time with you best." Olaf told her calmly, poking the fire. "And my son is a lot of things but stupid isn't one of them. He wouldn't like spending time with someone who isn't as smart as he is."

Adrianna didn't have a response to this so she remained quiet. Olaf watched her for a minute or two but she pretended she didn't notice.

"You know how I can tell you're a smart kid?" he asked. Adrianna shook her head. "You never point out the obvious. Most kids your age, they just tell you what's going on in their lives and leave it at that. But you and Erick, you like to pick apart your thoughts and draw conclusions. You like to think about ideas. So what if you can't read? What you can do is better."

Adrianna's lips twitched upward in a smile. Her daddy was the strongest man in the world... but she could see why Erick thought his was.

\* \* \*

><p>Finn barely slept that night. It was far too uncomfortable in his chains. His stomach growled loudly but no one came down to offer him any food. At this point, he would eat just about anything. His throat was so sore, each time he coughed, he thought he could taste blood. He had no idea how long he had been down there but he was beginning to suspect that it had been close to 24 hours. No one had spoken to him since he had awakened from unconsciousness. The belly of the ship was filled with a putrid smell of just about every bodily fluid, some of it Finn's. It was stifling. Finn's nausea worsened and he prayed to the gods that he wouldn't vomit all over himself. Though he was beginning to wonder if he had anything left in this stomach. Perhaps that was the <em>only<em> thing keeping him from doing so. But still he would not cry.

As sunlight began to shine again, several large men opened a hatch and descended the stairs. Finn blinked, his eyes in pain from sudden exposure to the bright sun. He looked to his right and saw two men, both quite a bit older than him, chained as tightly as him. But the men seemed to find him more interesting. They crowded around like vultures over a corpse, laughing at his battered appearance. One man seized him while another removed his shackles. Finn didn't think he could possibly be more humiliated than he already was.

But, as in other areas in life, things can always get worse. The men got to work holding him while they ripped off his clothes. The only thing more humiliating than standing in front of them in his soaked clothing was standing naked in their midst. He heard several lewd comments about his body before they tied a loincloth around his waist. Then he was held tightly while the slave handlers did the same to the two other slaves. Finn shut his eyes and tried to block out their piercing voices.

He was then shackled to the other slaves and taken to the deck of the boat. One of the men grabbed his head and pulled it down while another one pressed something white hot against the back of his ear. He screamed in agony and struggled but it was no use. He had no idea why they had done it but he knew that he had just received the worst burn of his life. And that was saying something considering the pets his parents kept.

Within a few minutes, he was taken out of the ship and forced to march, shackled to the other slaves, to a platform. The slave handlers began speaking to a crowd of, Finn suspected, prospective buyers, but he didn't understand what they were saying. Everyone in this new place spoke a different language. Before long, he was pushed onto the platform as the slave handler shouted something to the crowd. People were yelling and screaming and pushing and shoving, all clamoring to get their hands on a young, healthy boy, especially one with such vivid red hair and odd features.

But one person, a large, middle aged man with dark hair and small, cold gray eyes, appeared to have made the best offer. Laughing with glee, the slave handlers removed Finn's shackles and shoved him at the man, who roughly grabbed him by the upper arm while he deposited a large bag of what sounded like coins in one of the slave handler's hand.

Finn dearly wanted to ask what was going on as he was now yanked through the crowd and down a rocky path that cut and bruised his feet with each step. The man held him by the elbow, his other hand

gripping a wooden cane which helped him walk. Finn winced when the man's hand made it down to his wrist, which was in agony from the chains it had rubbed against for a full day and night. But he did not cry out.

It took a long time for them to reach their destination, a small cottage on the edge of town. An elderly man was on his knees in the front of the house, pulling weeds from a small flowerbed. He looked up when Finn and the man arrived. After conversing with the man for a moment, the man who bought him looked at Finn. The boy wanted to shrink back but he had just enough courage left to stand tall. This was the man he would be forced to serve. Possibly for the rest of his life. He didn't like the look in the man's eyes. There was no mercy, no compassion. Nothing remotely human about him.

And that was what frightened Finn the most.

\* \* \*

><p><em>And this is where it's going to get complicated!<em>

\_In addition to continuing Finn's story, I really hope this chapter shed some light on Adrianna as well. The complaints of her being under-developed were really valid so I spent several days agonizing over her. I was so frustrated, I very nearly scrapped the whole series! But then I thought of my plans for her character development later in the series and decided to get started a lot earlier. Hopefully you all can now see her as an individual rather than a part of Hiccup's character.\_

\_Special thanks to \_\_\*\*httydfan1991\*\*\_\_ and \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for reading over parts of this to make sure it wasn't terrible. Also to \_\_\*\*amyboomerang\*\*\_\_ with some assistance in research (okay, so I did a little but not much). Finally, to \_\_\*\*Miss Pookamonga\*\*\_\_ for being such a good writer, she rubs off on me. Seriously. Write more! You have the weird ability to single-handedly transform my writing into a work of art!\_

\_Oh, and a very special thank you to everyone who has assured me that they will keep reading, both here and on tumblr! I am so grateful for all of you! I don't understand why people like these stories so much but if you keep loving them, I'll keep writing them!\_

\_Don't forget to review!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

## 9. Last Adventure

\_SORRY I WAS SO LATE IN UPDATING THIS!\_

\_This story should just be called Procrastination. Because that has been my life while writing it. \_\_Little Miracles\_\_ was exciting and fun to write because I had a very clear vision of what I wanted and, of course, there were all those emotional scenes. Enjoy this story because nothing that bad happens to Adrianna. It's Finn's turn! And if you think all this is too much, we haven't even gotten to the twins' teen years yet. Those will be quite exciting, both in good and bad ways. You know my writing by now; keep the tissues close. But

really, the reason I took so long to start this chapter was a MASSIVE inspiration for a story that won't be written in months and helping \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ with \_\_Testing the Vows\_\_. Okay, enough stalling, on with the chapter!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Nine: Last Adventure<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>The Terrible Terror arrived early the next morning, startling the exhausted father from his search for his son. Finn had been gone over a day and he was beginning to think that Astrid really would have a reason to kill him. And though he felt a tightness in his chest over the thought that Finn might be dead, he couldn't even bring himself to feel anything except apathy and mild irritation. But even someone completely distracted with his own thoughts and feelings would notice talons digging into his shoulder.<p>

"Ack! Go away!" Hiccup growled, trying to brush off the small dragon.

The Terror, not one to be deterred by irritated recipients, stuck out her foot with a squawk. Hiccup relaxed his muscles slightly.

"I'm sorry... I'm... what have you got for me?" he asked, untying the message from her foot as gently as he could as a sort of silent apology.

The Terror immediately turned and flew away, apparently not wanting to spend a second more than she had to with this grumpy man. Hiccup hardly paid attention to her ascent, instead turning his focus to the letter.

\_To whom it may concern, \_

\_Master Haddock (junior) decided to stow away on my ship and I, unfortunately not considering this possibility, didn't manage to find him until I was nearly to my next destination. Rest assured that the lad is in perfect health and in my care. Please fly to Rune immediately to fetch him.\_

\_Sincerely, \_

\_Trader Johann\_

Hiccup breathed a sigh of relief. Finn was a day's flight away! And he was certainly going to be punished when he got back. But not right that second. He had to find Astrid. Their differences aside, she needed to know.

Perhaps it was residual concern from "old Hiccup" but he found it easy to track her down. She was on the other side of the island and glared at the sight of the Night Fury pelting toward her.

"Hiccup, I am not in any mood to-"

"Finn's fine. He's with Trader Johann." Hiccup interrupted. "He's on Rune right now, we just have to pick him up."

Astrid stared at him for a few seconds. "We should probably call off the search."

"You think?" Hiccup snapped irritably, not waiting for her to respond before flying in the opposite direction.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup wasn't usually silent in council meetings. Either he led them or was vocal in decision making. But this one was different. He didn't feel like speaking unless he had something to say which, of course, did not go unnoticed by the people who had known him the longest. Snotlout cast glances at him, hoping that his words had at least put a dent in his hardened outer shell. His words had apparently bounced off because the chief looked as sullen as ever. Hiccup was quite preoccupied with the fire in the corner of the room, which he was staring at with rapt attention.<p>

Once everyone was seated, Horst strode to the front and faced the council members. Hiccup barely blinked. He seemed to have forgotten anyone else was there at all.

"We don't have a whole lot of time so I'm going to cut to the chase." he began, giving both Hiccup and Astrid stern glances. "You are a disgrace as leaders, both of you. You humiliate yourselves, your children, and your tribe. Your ancestors would be rolling in their graves at how low you both stoop at everyone's expense, including your own." Astrid gritted her teeth but Hiccup acted as if he couldn't hear a word Horst was saying. "With this in mind, as your leadership council, we have come to the conclusion that, upon your divorce, the village of Berk and Hooligan tribe will no longer recognize the Haddock clan as our leadership, Hiccup will no longer be recognized as our chief, and we will elect a new chief and tribal clan to lead us."

Astrid stiffened. "You can do that?"

"Yes they can." Hiccup bit out before Horst could resume speaking.

Astrid turned back to Horst. "We are removed as leaders only if we divorce?"

"Unless something happens between you two while still in marriage, yes. In the end, we are watching. We won't let our village crumble from top to bottom because you both lose control. You can't control people if you can't even control yourselves." Astrid smirked at Hiccup, causing Horst to bristle with sudden rage. "I'm speaking to both of you!" he shouted, making everyone in the room, even Hiccup, jump. "You are every much a leader as he is! Wipe that infernal smirk off your face and stop acting as if you are better off than he is! At least he takes his criticism! All I get from you is eye rolls and huffs, and then stewing in satisfaction when he's ridiculed! You are in hot water just as much as your husband, so I'd highly suggest you take yourself down a peg, Astrid!"

Astrid, as well as several other council members, stared at Horst with their mouths hanging slightly open. Horst wasn't the sort of man who lost control very often, in fact he was quite soft spoken, but

when he did, he seemed to change entirely. The fire in his eyes made everyone blanch slightly and some scooted away a little bit.

Astrid, however, remained where she was. She wanted to argue but something in her gut told her that he was probably right. Perhaps she could take herself down a peg. If Hiccup would stop patronizing her. And she didn't see that happening any time soon. While she stewed in her own internal rage, she arranged her face in a more neutral expression, trying to convey false shame.

Horst watched Astrid for a moment during the deafening silence. Anyone who didn't know her well at all would assume, judging by the expression plastered to her face, that she was apologetic. But Horst knew from the fiery look in her eyes that her attitude hadn't changed a bit.

He took a deep breath and continued. "Also for the safety of your children upon your divorce, Finn and Adrianna will be removed and given to proper guardians-"

Hiccup's head snapped up. Astrid choked on thin air for a moment. "What-"

"Wait a minute!" Hiccup held up a slightly trembling hand. "You can't do that!"

"We can and we will, Hiccup." Snotlout added, his stony gaze turned to his chief. "If we can't trust you two to even talk to each other in a civilized manner, why in the world would we allow you to keep damaging your children by forcing them to put up with your selfishness even a moment longer?"

Hiccup swallowed hard and shook his head. "You can't take them. They're the only people keeping me sane-"

Astrid huffed a bit. "You mean Adrianna is the only one keeping you sane-"

"I love my son! How dare you even imply that I don't!" Hiccup snarled. "You know why I need them to keep me from losing my mind, why I'm going insane in the first place? It's because of you!"

Astrid jumped to her feet and stomped over to her husband, her face red with rage. "And this is why they're taking them away from us!"

Snotlout put out a hand, stepping next to Horst. "Now wait-"

Astrid continued as if she hadn't heard him. "No one trusts us to take care of our own children because of all your bull-headed nonsense these past few years! Over a little incident that you couldn't just get over!"

"ENOUGH!" Horst bellowed, silencing the Hall once more. By this point, Astrid was nearly nose-to-nose with Hiccup, who was trembling with anger. For a moment, they stared at each other, their eyes flashing. Then Astrid stepped back and faced Horst. "You bring this all on yourselves. That is why Hiccup will go to get Finn from Rune. Astrid, you will stay here with Adrianna and try to mend your broken



relationship. If you can't fix it by the time Hiccup and Finn return, you are finished."

Astrid was breathless for a moment. "H-Horst-"

"No. We've seen enough. Hiccup will leave as soon as possible and you are going to get your daughter, bring her back here. We all need a talk." Horst continued in a much quieter voice. "Dismissed." he waved a hand and everyone quickly stood and nearly stampeded out of the Hall to escape the tension, even for only a few minutes.

Fishlegs, however, remained. He looked at Horst resolutely. "I'd like permission to go with Hiccup to retrieve Finn."

Hiccup shut his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "I don't need any help."

Fishlegs turned to Hiccup. "I don't care. You need someone to go with you. It might as well be me."

Before Hiccup could protest, Horst nodded. "It is agreed then. Both of you prepare to leave as soon as possible. Astrid, bring your daughter here in twenty minutes."

Hiccup glared at Fishlegs but allowed him to walk alongside him as they exited the Hall. Astrid took several deep breaths before walking out after them.

\* \* \*

><p>Adrianna liked escaping from her day-to-day life as frequently as she could. This was hampered in part because of her father's need for her company. The other children didn't like waiting for her to be available to join them in play. But Erick Larson wasn't just any other child. A shy boy exactly one and a half years her senior, Erick was the kind of child who simply enjoyed doing <em>nothing<em>. Like Adrianna, he didn't have much patience for the other children, who liked much rougher play than either of them.

Erick had aspirations to work with leather when he grew up because he was good with his hands and liked the smell and the feel of it. Adrianna didn't know what she wanted to do as a grown-up. Some days she wanted to tell stories. Others she wanted to work at the Academy. And still others, she wanted to work with babies because she loved making them smile. In the end, she was completely undecided. She and Erick would discuss it at length but neither would have a sufficient answer and both would eventually become distracted by their own imaginations. That was the way it was between the two of them. Imagination ruled their time together rather than the silly games the other kids liked to play like Hide and Go Kill. Adrianna always thought that, though she really didn't have much playtime thanks to her reservations and their conflicting schedules, she was lucky to have made one very good friend as opposed to a bunch of friends who really didn't understand her at all.

It was for this reason that she was rather frustrated when her mother cut her playtime short by coming to fetch her looking every bit as grouchy as she had the day she had slapped her. Adrianna's heart plummeted.

"Anna, we have to go." Astrid snapped. "Get your things and come with me."

"Why?" Adrianna asked, only partially out of stubbornness.

"Because I just told you... no. Okay. I'm sorry, I'm not trying to snap, I... the council wants to talk to us." Astrid said, sounding more like she was talking to herself than to her daughter.

"It's okay Anna." Erick smiled at Astrid in an agreeable sort of way. "Can I come?"

Astrid stared into his teal eyes for nearly a minute. She didn't want him to come... but he was a big part of Adrianna's life. She would let the council decide.

"I'll ask. Just get your things and come with me. We don't have a whole lot of time." she said as gently as she could, reaching out a hand for Adrianna.

Adrianna glanced at the hand and walked past it. Astrid tried not to take this personally (though she knew that was exactly how her daughter had meant it) as she followed Erick and Adrianna into the village. The friends didn't hold hands anymore but occasionally, their hands would brush up against each other. It was like they still had the urge but felt they were too old to do anything so childish. Astrid was reminded of the days when she was eager to grow up. But now that she had grown up, she wished she had made more of the time she had as a child.

The trio arrived at the Great Hall after a few minutes. The council members, minus Hiccup and Fishlegs, were waiting for them to arrive. Horst gave permission for Erick to join the meeting, explaining that he might prove to be useful in this situation. Or, at the very least, be of some comfort to Adrianna in the midst of all the adults.

When they had taken their seats, Horst spoke up. "Hopefully this will be brief." he said in a voice loud enough to reach the back of the room but not so loud that it was intimidating. "Your recent behavior has proven to be problematic and we would like to intervene now before it gets out of hand."

Adrianna raised her eyebrows the tiniest bit. She glanced at Erick, who shrugged.

"Until further notice, Adrianna will be placed with the Larsons and all contact between her and Astrid will be closely monitored so that no more incidents occur." Horst continued.

"You can't do that; she's my kid!" Astrid shouted, not bothering to keep her voice down. "Whatever problems we're having, we can work them out on our own!"

"As you and Hiccup are so expertly demonstrating." Horst said vitriolically before turning to face the rest of the council. "Her reading lessons will be conducted by Gobber from this point forward, however Astrid is permitted to sit in on them if she wants."

"Gobber teach my daughter to read?" Astrid turned to look at

Gobber, who was giving her a rather firm gaze.

"I helped Hiccup with his reading lessons. And I want to help, if that's all right with you, Anna." Gobber turned to look at the girl, who bit her lip.

"Okay." she said timidly.

"Now hang on a second, you said that if Anna and I don't improve our relationship, you were going to-"

"I am well aware of my previous statement." Horst swiftly cut through Astrid's words, his eyes flitting to Adrianna and back. He paused for a moment, his brow furrowed. Then he took a deep breath and turned to face Astrid. "Astrid, do you love your daughter?"

"What kind of question-"

"\_Do you love your daughter\_?" Horst repeated firmly.

Astrid turned to look at Adrianna, whose wide green eyes were fixed on her. She looked nervous about what she was about to hear. Astrid felt a twinge of guilt. Did Adrianna \_really\_ think her own mother didn't love her?

"Yes, of course I do." the mother said softly, meeting her daughter's gaze and hoping that she sounded as genuine as she felt.

"Adrianna?" Horst turned to the girl, who was still looking at Astrid. "Do you love your mother?"

Mother and daughter stared at each other for several seconds. "Yes." Adrianna replied.

A small smile brightened Horst's features. "Then let's work on showing it."

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup was always amazed at how much he needed to pack for what would likely be an overnight trip. A second set of clothes for both himself and Finn, a small tent, blankets, food for both humans and dragons, and some other odds and ends he needed, including his sketchbook. He hadn't drawn anything in a very long time. After he killed Dagur, inspiration seemed to evade him completely. He wondered if misery and guilt removed his creativity. He certainly hoped not. His love for Toothless and his children aside, his creativity felt like all he had left of himself.<p>

His eyes flitted to the drawer next to his bed. He had a dagger in there that he had recently sharpened. Slowly, he opened the door and gingerly put his fingers around its hilt. For a moment, he considered removing it from its sheath... but he quickly shook his head and placed it, along with everything else, in his bag, which he then tied to Toothless.

"What do you say, bud? One more adventure?" he asked with a small smile, gently patting the dragon on the top of the head.

Toothless cooed in concern but Hiccup didn't have time to address it

because Fishlegs' voice permeated the house.

"You about ready, Hiccup?" he called.

"Yes. Just a second." Hiccup called back.

He looked around his room. A room he and Astrid had shared for nearly eight years. In some ways, it looked exactly the same way it had looked when they first moved in. He had done some painting on the walls but the bed was the same, as was the furniture. There were little marks on the wall from when the twins would sleep in a crib near their bed rather than in the nursery. He felt like smiling when he remembered the first time one of the twins had fallen ill. He and Astrid had been out of their minds with worry. He had even refused to touch Adrianna unless he changed clothes after holding Finn. But she had caught the bug as well and so, for a few days, he and his wife had to deal with two very miserable babies. That was why they had moved the crib... thus why there were marks on the wall... and why was he suddenly remembering that in the first place? His heart constricted slightly but he shook his head and led Toothless out of the house.

Fishlegs was standing at the front door, his supplies strapped to Meatlug. "You sure you have everything?"

"Knowing me, I've probably forgotten something." Hiccup rolled his eyes. "I just want to get this over with."

Fishlegs didn't like the almost dead look in his friend's usually bright green eyes but he chose to ignore it for the moment so that he and Hiccup could find Finn sooner. The last thing he needed was to argue with the chief before they had taken off.

As they arrived at the cliff from which they would fly to Rune, they heard frantic footfalls steadily rising in volume.

"Daddy!" Adrianna called, running as fast as she could to her father. "Don't go yet!"

Hiccup's smile was every bit as dead as his eyes but the girl chose not to comment on this. "I wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, Addie."

He put his arms around his daughter and held her close. His heart began to pound. This little girl, this miracle who seemed not to know she was special at all... no. He would not think about that. Thinking about how wonderful she was, how much better off she would be without him, made his heart ache and a few tears find their way into his eyelids. He blinked them away before breaking the hug and taking her shoulders.

"You take care." he said, his voice trembling slightly. "And don't you stop dreaming, not even for a second." he gently brushed her hair out of her eyes, her beautiful green eyes so much like his own. "I love you, Addie."

Adrianna didn't like the look in her father's eyes but there was truly nothing she could do or say to make the brightness return to them. "I love you too." she said with a sigh. "Don't forget, okay?"

"I could never forget that." Hiccup tenderly kissed her forehead.

Fishlegs watched this exchange with a concerned gaze. Something was distinctly off about it. It almost seemed like Hiccup was saying goodbye to someone he knew he wouldn't see again anytime soon... but that was crazy talk. He and Adrianna would be reunited within a day or two. So why was he acting this way?

Snotlout strode up to Fishlegs as Hiccup continued to speak to his daughter. Their eyes met and Fishlegs raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Yeah." Snotlout said, turning back to Hiccup. "I see it too."

"Do you think we should tell someone?" Fishlegs asked in a low voice so the chief couldn't hear.

"We could be wrong. Just keep an eye on him and communicate with us. Let us know what happens. Or what you think is going to happen." Snotlout replied.

Hiccup had finally finished saying goodbye to his daughter. He mounted Toothless, looking like he was going to take off without another word. Snotlout hurried forward and grasped his arm.

"Be safe." he said, trying not to appear too concerned for fear Hiccup would begin to press for details.

"I'm only worried about Finn." Hiccup replied in monotone.

"Yeah." Snotlout said, stepping back to allow Toothless room to take off. "That's what worries us." he muttered.

The Night Fury and the Gronckle spread their wings and flew over the vast ocean stretching ahead of them. Fishlegs glanced at Hiccup and was slightly alarmed to see him breathing heavily, casting quick glances back to Berk. His hands were tight against Toothless' reins, his arms shaking the tiniest bit. He looked like he desperately wanted to turn back. But as Berk disappeared into the horizon, he became less tense. His eyes were fixed ahead, his thoughts only on his mission.

But Hiccup knew one thing Fishlegs didn't. Though his heart ached to even think about it, he had made a decision.

He would never return to Berk.\_.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Again, I am so sorry I waited so long to update this! And especially for awful this update was! This story is killing me. Though the climax is worth the wait (in addition to the later story I mentioned before), it is still no excuse for being lazy.<em>

You'll find out what's going on with Finn in the next chapter. It would have been this one but there were some issues so it had to be postponed.\_

\_Special thanks to \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for talking me into finishing this and to \_\_\*\*Fritz96\*\*\_\_ for being supportive of my writing endeavors no matter how annoying I can get. And, of course, to all of you for putting up with the long wait!\_

\_I feel a bit guilty asking for reviews since I was so lazy with this chapter but... if you want to post one, I won't complain!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

\_P.S. AGAIN, I AM SO SORRY!\_

## 10. Fortis

\_First of all, this chapter is very different from what I originally was planning to write but I think it works pretty well. The closer I get to the climax of the story (one chapter of which is already completed), the more frequent the updates will be. But I wanted to get this out a lot sooner than some of the others!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Ten: Fortis<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup never could understand why some people had such an aversion to traveling by dragon. The journey to Rune took a day and night on a ship yet he knew he and Fishlegs would get there before sundown. What he didn't know was just how much of an advantage this would be in the coming week or so.<p>

Rune's shores came into view after a few hours of silence. Hiccup's eyes were fixed on his goal while Fishlegs hung back a bit, partially because his dragon wasn't as fast but mostly because he didn't want to disturb his friend. Hiccup was tense and he didn't look back once. Fishlegs could have turned around and flown back to Berk and the Hooligan chief wouldn't have noticed until he arrived on Rune.

As they descended, they caught sight of what appeared to be a large mass of ships pressing in on the shore. They recognized Trader Johann's in seconds but there was no sign of the vivid red hair that would indicate that Finn was safe.

"Hiccup!" Trader Johann called, his eyes wide with what Hiccup hoped to Thor wasn't abject horror.

"Where is my son?" Hiccup asked as Toothless made a smooth landing on the shore next to the ship.

Trader Johann wrung his hands in front of his stomach, not quite meeting Hiccup's eye. Hiccup glared at him.

"Tell me where my son is." he growled as Fishlegs landed just behind him.

"Your son managed to slip away from me just after I sent the Terror." Trader Johann said in a rather high register. "I have been spending

every second looking for him and did manage to piece together what... what happened."

Fishlegs' stomach clenched at the murderous expression on Hiccup's face. He almost stepped between the two men.

"So help me Thor, if you do not tell me what happened to my son, I will kill you. Now start talking." Hiccup muttered menacingly.

"I've spoken to several of the locals, who say they saw a red haired boy walking alongside Javan the Deceiver." Trader Johann took a step back. "He appears to have gone missing soon after that."

"I've never heard of this... Javan." Hiccup said, stepping forward so that he remained the same distance away.

"You wouldn't have heard of him. He deals in... in the slave trade." Trader Johann winced.

Hiccup's mouth dropped open but no sound came out. He shut it with an audible snap, turning away and digging his fingers into his hair.

Fishlegs stepped forward. "Are you suggesting that this Javan person sold Finn into slavery?"

"I'm saying that it is a distinct possibility." the trader looked over at Hiccup, who seemed to be completely ignoring him. "I believe he's still on Rune. I have been unable to locate him but an aerial view might prove to be more useful. Last I heard, he was wearing brown trousers with money bags tied to them. Also a purple shirt underneath a brown vest. Though he always dresses rather vibrantly so you won't miss him. He's a tall man, long black hair and pale skin. Has a strange accent, though I'm not familiar with its origin."

Hiccup looked torn between punishing Trader Johann for his negligence and going to find Javan. Grumbling to himself, he turned from the trader and stomped into the crowd, gritting his teeth rather hard. Fishlegs hurried after him. There was no doubt in his mind that if Hiccup as much as caught sight of his son's captor, he would kill him. And Fishlegs wasn't about to let Hiccup take another life.

Many people knew that Javan considered himself to be a very brave man. He had killed people over financial disputes, fought with pirates, and even slew an army of dragons (admittedly they had been Terrible Terrors but he tended to leave that detail out when regaling people with this story). But his job mostly entailed finding strong young orphan boys and selling them to the slave trade for a very good profit. He lived very well and was receiving quite a reputation (and not all of it negative).

But even the bravest man in the world would have been frightened by what was about to come.

Hiccup stomped through the village, his jaw clenched and his fists at his sides. Toothless followed, cooing in concern. It was all Fishlegs could do to keep up and even so, they lost the pair several times before they came across an oddly dressed man fitting the description given to them by Trader Johann.

The man had his back to Hiccup, talking to what appeared to be another young boy oblivious to his fate. Hiccup grabbed the collar of his shirt and slammed him against the wall of a nearby house.

"Zebah?" Javan sputtered. "You're alive?"

It was this bizarre reaction that prevented Hiccup from throttling the man on the spot. They stared at each other for a few seconds, both completely silent.

"You... you're not Zebah... then who-"

The spell was broken. Hiccup leaned in, still gritting his teeth. "You sold my son."

"I did no such thing!" Javan whimpered in a high, frightened voice. "The boys I sell are orphaned-"

"Funny, a lot of people seem to think they saw you with him just before he went missing!" Hiccup leaned in so that his nose almost touched Javan's. "Maybe you remember him. Red hair, blue eyes, lots of freckles, goes by the name of Fearless Finn Haddock!" the man paled. "Yes, I can tell you're making the connection. You're not the only one with a reputation around here!"

"Hiccup, don't kill him." Fishlegs pleaded.

"H-Hiccup? As in ch-chief of the Hooligans?" Javan stammered. "Oh believe me, I never... I mean if I had known-"

"Now you listen to me you disgusting piece of scum!" Hiccup hissed. "You have five seconds to tell me where you sent my son before I kill you!"

It occurred to Javan, as he stared into the cold eyes of the man who had killed Dagur the Deranged and who had an army of dragons as his disposal that perhaps he ought to have asked for the boy's full name before immediately sending him off on the closest slave ship.

"I don't know the full name of the ship!" he whimpered. "But they said it was The Bloody... something. I don't know where it goes!"

"If I find out you lied, I will spend my life tracking you down so I can kill you. Do you understand?" Hiccup snarled.

"Yes! I swear to you on my father's grave that I speak the truth!" Javan cried, shaking with fear. "Now let me go!"

Hiccup stared into the man's face, hatred etched into his features. For a moment, he wanted to grab the dagger from his satchel and stab the man, watch the life drain from his terrified eyes. It wasn't like he hadn't killed before... but added guilt would make everything so much worse. He opened his hand and allowed Javan to drop to the ground. As the man scampered away, an idea popped into his head.

"Javan!" he shouted.



Javan turned his head just in time to see the fist coming directly at his face a split second before he was propelled backward. There was a sickening crack and blood poured from his nose. Hiccup shook his hand off and turned to Fishlegs, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"I suppose we'll just have to continue to question people." he said in an unnervingly calm voice before turning and walking back into the crowd.

\* \* \*

><p>White pain flashed across Finn's face as his master slapped him. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain but managed to face his master and stand tall with his hands at his sides, as he was taught. He had soon learned that his master's name was Ratri, and he was a very cruel, devious man with such a cold eye for detail that honestly made Finn wonder how he didn't clean the house himself. If the ugly man wasn't satisfied with the boy's hard work with raw fingers and chipped fingernails, why didn't he just do the stinking work himself? But of course, Finn made no sound. He had learned early on never to talk back to his master. It would only get him beaten worse than he already was.<p>

Instead, he had been firmly instructed (and had watched Benen, the elderly slave, demonstrate time and time again) to bow low to the waist whenever he needed to speak to his master. Ratri would always speak first, even if Finn came to him with an inquiry. The boy could only respond with "Yes sir" and "No sir" when not directly asking a question himself, but even then he had to begin or end each sentence with the phrase. It was daunting, but he soon grew into the habit. The previous day he'd been slapped and kicked until there were bruises. But still, he wouldn't cry. He would face his new life with an air of dignity, as taught by his father. He would no longer become the chief of the Hooligans one day due to his recklessness and consequential dilemma, but he wouldn't go down acting like the poor invalid that he now was.

"Look at dis!" Ratri hollered, his hands waving at the floor. Finn had been scrubbing for hours, yet the grime refused to lift. It was like the house hadn't been clean in centuries. His hands, knees and neck ached from the painful crouched position, but any sound of complaint would only earn him more torture. "You could not clean dis properly if I gave you a wash tub of the finest soap made in Rome!"

"I've been trying real hard, sir, honest!" Finn flinched when the man swung for another slap, but he quickly dodged into a very low bow. Ratri hissed in anger and struck the boy in the legs with his cane. Finn fell to his knees and instantly covered his head with his arms.

Ratri raised his cane over his head and brought it down over and over. "I will teach youâ€| to never dodgeâ€| my blowsâ€| again!"

Finn clutches his red hair and gritted his teeth, his body shuddering at each hard smack of the cane against his back. Finally, Ratri stopped and kicked the boy onto his back so he could see the boy's

face. Finn yelped, but made no other sound.

"You will clean dis floor spotless or heaven above help ya if tis not done before I am back!" Ratri whacked the boy's leg with his cane for good measure before clicking toward the door. "Stultus puer parvulus."

Finn jerked when the door slammed and he waited until the sound of Ratri's cane and footsteps faded away before he gingerly sat up. He scowled at his scabbed feet for a moment. Stultus puer parvulus—Stupid little boy. It hadn't taken long for him to figure out some phrases the man muttered in his native tongue. Other phrases included Tuprimus spurcorum, which he assumed meant "you filthy little brat", and Foedis, Nequam and Irrita were common terms Ratri used to refer to him. These words meant "disgusting, worthless, useless". Finn's personal favorite that he had figured out happened to be Non tibi ego pro nihilo pecuniam, which meant "you are not worth the money I paid for you."

It was almost comical how Finn didn't even realize he had a knack for languages. He had picked up the meanings of these phrases just within the first day. When he was finally alone on his mat in the middle of the night, when he didn't fall into immediate slumber due to exhaustion, he'd found himself whispering Latin phrases to himself, trying to figure out what phrases meant and how to speak them. He wouldn't dare speak in Latin to anyone though—he'd surely be disciplined. But if he were home, he would speak Latin to his family. His father would surely be impressed, his mother would nod in approval and lovingly press him to keep working hard, his little sister would listen to his incoherent babble with an open mouth and enthralled expression. His friends would probably pester him nonstop to speak like some crazy person in a cool, awesome way.

But he wasn't home. Home was just a memory now. He would never see his family again. How would he? They didn't even know he left until hours later; there was no possible way they could ever find him. Not out here on another island where slavery ran rampant and abuse was encouraged. A bubble of a laugh blew past Finn's lips for a moment. It was funny how much a person could take the most precious things for granted until they were long gone—he'd like his parents, his little sister, Toothless and Stormfly, Gobber, Berk—freedom.

A wave of depression hit Finn like a ton of bricks and he dropped his face into his hands, still sitting cross legged on the dirty floor. Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, his mind screamed, but the tears continued to well up. He pulled at his hair to keep from breaking down, and he realized the pain helped him focus. Perhaps that was why his father pulled at his hair when he was angry or confused or stressed. The pain probably kept him from going insane.

Soft footsteps echoed down the hall and Finn's head snapped up in fear. It was Benen. The frail old man with hunched shoulders stepped closer to the boy, his wrinkled skin covered in noticeable scars from head to toe. He gently reached down and grasped Finn's forearm, helping him stand. Finn gingerly stood, his back screeching in pain from the new bruises. He quickly wiped his eyes with the heel of his grubby hands, not caring that it was filthy. The boy flinched when Benen gave a short look at his back, but said nothing. He then stood in front of the boy with a soft, compassionate gaze.

Finn stared into his equally blue eyes with confusion before Benen gently pulled him to his chest in a soft hug. Finn tensed in shock but realized the elderly slave meant him no harm. He found himself clinging to the old man and again forcing his eyes not to water. He would not cry.

Benen released him from the hug and lightly grasped his shoulders. He pointed to Finn's chest with a single finger and smiled. "Fortis," he murmured in the quietest, raspiest of voices before turning and retreating back down the hall.

Finn stared at the man's hunched back in disbelief. He wanted to follow the kind man, to just live and breathe in his compassion as it was the first piece of kindness he had received since—since Javan betrayed him. Of course that wasn't real kindness. But it certainly felt that way at the time. The point being, he didn't know when he had received kindness last. And he sorely missed it.

But the floor would not clean itself and there was no telling when Ratri would return. He certainly didn't want to see any more of his own blood than he already had, thankfully in short amounts so far. He grabbed his water bucket and brush and hurried outside as fast as he could to get more water, Benen's single word echoing in his mind.

Fortis.

Strong.

\* \* \*

><p>Toothless had fought with his rider on many occasions and had destroyed more enemy ships than he could count. But watching men, women, and children leaping out of a burning ship wasn't what he had expected to see when he followed his order.<p>

"Now I'm going to ask you one more time." Hiccup said, a dagger outstretched and his hand clasping a man's collar. "Where does that ship go?"

The man trembled, his life flashing before his eyes. "I only know the first stop!" he said in a high register.

"Well speak up then!" Hiccup growled, pressing the dagger down harder on the man's windpipe.

"Maero! It goes to Maero!" Hiccup made an impatient huffing noise so the man continued. "It's a Roman territory south of here! Just keep sailing and you'll find it! Day and night's journey! Please don't kill me!"

"Waste my time killing you?" Hiccup let the man go, watching him collapse in a heap as his feet. "I only kill real men." he kicked the man. "Now go before I change my mind."

The man made a whimpering noise and nodded his head profusely, standing up and running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

"This place is despicable." Hiccup said through his teeth, turning

back to Fishlegs, who had been watching the scene with wide eyes. "I have half a mind to bring the entire Hooligan army back here and have it destroyed."

"Hiccup, maybe you should calm down." Fishlegs muttered nervously. "We know where he is now."

"Oh yes, knowing where he is, well that's exactly like being there, isn't it?" Hiccup shouted, not at all caring who overheard. "I will find the men who sold my son and I will make them pay."

"Listen, it's getting dark. We're going to need to set up camp before we make the flight." Fishlegs said in a far too casual voice. "Finn is strong. Odds are he's still there. And you can't get him if you haven't gotten any sleep."

Hiccup knew that Fishlegs' logic was sound but the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach made it rather difficult to concentrate. Another night of reliving the worst moment of his life. And then going to take his son from the kind of sadistic person who would buy a human being.

"Into the woods." Hiccup said after a moment's hesitation. "I don't want to look at anyone here. It's probably better for everyone if I avoid the temptation to slaughter anyone who may have seen my son being taken without doing anything to stop it."

"Yes." Fishlegs said, following his companion into the woods. "That's probably wise."

As the men hiked through the forest without another word, Fishlegs couldn't help feeling like he was traveling with a stranger. He and Hiccup had known each other their entire lives yet Hiccup had never struck him as the kind of person who would resort to threats to get what he wanted. He seemed even less likely to become that man after he tamed dragons, married Astrid, and raised two children.

Fishlegs sighed deeply. Perhaps Hiccup had been right. Perhaps the Hiccup who had done all those great things truly was dead.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Before you compliment the slavery bit, I should probably tell you that <em>\_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ wrote it, not me. I put her on slavery duty after reading that. She does such a good job and I just can't quite figure out how to write like that. But I did write the Hiccup bits at the beginning and end. Probably why it's not as well written.\_\_

Hope you enjoyed! Leave a review if you did... and even if you didn't.

~KateMarie999~

## 11. A Shot in the Right Direction

This chapter is dedicated to \_\_\*\*Miss Pookamonga\*\*\_\_, who basically told me she wanted a chapter like this. Upon hearing her reasons, I

completely agree with her. I mean it was all in the plan but I'm expanding on it a lot more than originally planned. Addie fans rejoice! People who don't like her, I only ask that you put up with her a bit longer.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Eleven: A Shot in the Right Direction<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>True to form, Adrianna was not an early riser. And after a mercifully dreamless sleep, she found herself alone in the Larson girls' room with the sun shining through the windows. Rubbing her eyes and yawning widely, she rose from the bed and quietly put on a clean skirt and a shirt that smelled clean enough. She smoothed out her hair and shuffled out the door to the hustle and bustle of the village square. She wasn't used to being this close to so many people just after waking up. More often than not, she spent her first hour awake alone on the front porch. She liked these moments of solitude. But she supposed she was going to have to do without one this morning.<p>

The good thing about emerging from a house located close to the village square was that it was a very short walk to the forge. Several passersby gave her an odd look as she strolled through the crowd but she paid them no heed. Gobber was pounding away at some kind of weapon (Adrianna still didn't know the names of all of them). He looked up and his eyes widened.

"Good gods, Anna, your hair!" he exclaimed, not bothering to keep his voice down.

Adrianna reached up and tried to smooth her messy hair down once more. "What's wrong with my hair?"

"You look like a mace head. Now where is my hairbrush?" Gobber asked, more to himself than to his almost-grandniece.

Adrianna furrowed her brow in confusion. "Why do you need a hairbrush? You don't have any hair!"

"But you do!" Gobber replied, finally extracting what looked like a very old hairbrush from a nearby drawer. "You wouldn't understand unless you go bald. And I hope, for your sake, it never happens to you."

"It won't. Girls don't go bald." Adrianna informed him, running the brush through her tangles.

It was a good thing Gobber had stopped the girl from going about her day looking like she had weeds on her head because Astrid turned up moments after her daughter had finished brushing her hair. She nodded in approval at Adrianna's appearance before turning to Gobber.

"I'm not late, am I?" she asked him.

"For the reading lesson? You're right on time." Gobber replied jovially. "I was just about to get started."

Astrid's eyes scanned the room. "I don't see any word lists."

"Word lists? Bah, those are a waste of time." Gobber waved his hand dismissively. "You want your daughter to read, you teach her the way she'll learn."

Adrianna didn't appreciate being spoken about like she wasn't standing two feet away from the grown-ups but she was beginning to enjoy the conversation. She took a step back and sat down on a nearby stool.

"I taught her the way my mother taught me and it worked just fine on Finn." Astrid replied, her voice sounding almost threatening.

"Well, and I don't mean to insult your intelligence by saying so but Anna and Finn aren't really the same person, now are they?" Gobber smiled at the irritated look on Astrid's face. "I take it by your silence you agree. And you and Anna aren't the same person either."

"Where are you going with this?"

"Well Hiccup was a bit slow in this area as well 'til I came up with some ideas to make it a bit easier for him. Anna might respond similarly." Gobber suddenly grasped a bow and several arrows. "Both of you, follow me."

Astrid and Adrianna exchanged curious glances before following the large man as he hobbled into the woods. It didn't take long to arrive at a clearing where Gobber had set up several targets, each covered with several written words.

"The way I see it," he said as he placed the arrows on the ground, "it's not enough to tell them to sound out the words. She seems to have that down. But can she pick them out of a clump of words?" Gobber handed Adrianna the bow and an arrow. "I take it you've used one of these before."

"Umm..." Adrianna looked down at the weapon in her hands. "No."

"Ahh... well then you'll be learning something else." Gobber removed a spyglass from his belt. "Hold this to your eye and look at the words on the targets." Adrianna slowly took the spyglass from Gobber and put it up to her eye. "That's enough." he said, now snatching the spyglass out of her hand. "You'll be shooting left handed."

"But I'm right handed." Adrianna protested.

"Yes but it's not about what hand you write with, it's about the stronger eye. And your left eye is stronger. You want to get the best angle." Gobber pointed to the target as Adrianna placed the arrow in the bow the way she had watched her mother do it on several occasions. Astrid nodded in approval. "Now I want you to shoot the word 'dragon.'"

"But I've never shot an arrow before." Adrianna said, looking very nervous.

"Ahh. Well your mother has. Why don't you come up and show her,

Astrid?" Gobber beckoned for the girl's mother, looking quite confident.

Astrid took a few slow steps toward Adrianna, almost as if she thought her young daughter was going to suddenly burst into flames. She didn't know what Gobber was doing but it certainly didn't \_seem\_ like a reading lesson.

"Well it's pretty simple. Don't draw your strength from your arms, draw it from your core. And stand up straight. Elbow up a bit more... that's it." Astrid was surprised at how quickly Adrianna appeared to be picking up the skill. "Now, um... shoot the word 'dragon' like Gobber said."

"But that's a long word." Adrianna protested.

"Not really. Just sound it out, like I said. It's not so hard." Astrid pointed to one of the targets. "It's on that one. But that's all the help you're getting."

Adrianna nodded, her brow furrowed in concentration. She peered at the words on the target. Dragon... started with a D... didn't it? Yes, she thought, it did. And it was probably followed with an R. D... R... she smiled and shot the arrow at the target. It landed directly in the middle of the A.

"That's it!" Gobber exclaimed with a smile. "And you seem to be pretty good at archery too. Why hasn't anyone taught you before now?"

"I... I don't know. I didn't ask." Adrianna replied timidly. "I'm not very good with weapons."

"Ach, who told you that?" Gobber asked, shooting a suspicious glance at Astrid, whose eyes immediately focused on a nearby tree.

"Mommy. She said I don't have upper body strength." Adrianna replied quite calmly, not noticing her mother's obvious discomfort.

"That's not exactly what I meant." Astrid mumbled, still avoiding eye contact. "I mean... I just meant compared to Finn..." she sighed. "Can we go back to reading?"

Gobber stared at Astrid for a few moments before turning back to Adrianna. "I'd like you to shoot the word 'sword' and then 'mace' and then 'Viking.' Can you do that? I'd like to talk to your mom for a second but let me know when you're finished."

Adrianna nodded. Gobber immediately bounded forward and gripped Astrid's upper arm, gently leading her out of her daughter's earshot.

"Well I think I've figured out part of your problem." he said in a low voice. "You're not willing to teach her anything else. Anything that gives \_you\_ passion and enthusiasm."

"I do!" Astrid exclaimed, causing Adrianna to glance in their direction. She smiled and waited for the girl to turn back to the targets. "Look, I only said that because she wasn't very good at any of the things I was trying to show her. And Finn was. So I just..."

stopped teaching her."

"And did she want to keep learning?"

Astrid remained silent for a moment, her eyes now fixed on her boots. "Yes. But I told her she couldn't come with Finn and me because... because she wasn't as good."

Gobber stroked his chin. "So you excitedly taught Finn what you knew while leaving Anna out... why, that sounds a bit familiar, now doesn't it?"

Astrid backed away, not liking the sudden guilt causing her stomach to ache. "I'm not as bad as Hiccup; he dotes on her all the--"

"I'm not talking about Hiccup. I'm talking about you. And your daughter. How much time do you spend with her outside of her reading lessons?" Gobber's gaze was almost painful.

"She doesn't like anything I've tried to teach!" Astrid hissed through her teeth.

"She loves dragons, why haven't you focused on that?" Gobber asked without missing a beat.

"Because that's Hiccup's territory!" Astrid replied, beginning to feel quite agitated. "He knows more than I do!"

"But you know quite a bit more than most others, having run the Academy and worked alongside your husband all these years. I'd consider you every bit as much an expert as him." Gobber gestured in the direction of the village. "And you know more about your own dragon than he does. There's nothing you can teach your daughter that he can't?" Gobber glanced at Adrianna, who had successfully hit all three targets and was walking toward them. "She's a natural at archery. Maybe you shouldn't have given up so early."

The guilty feeling began to permeate Astrid's insides. She gritted her teeth, trying to feel angry at Gobber for pointing out her errors, but she couldn't quite push down the feeling that she had completely ruined her relationship with her own child.

"Anna, I'm going to go for a bit. Gobber can teach you some more. Is that okay?" she asked the girl, who was looking rather excited.

Adrianna shrugged. "Fine." she said, now tugging at Gobber's hook so that he would come over and check her progress.

Astrid walked away from her daughter, all sounds around her oddly muted as her mind began to spin. She needed some time to think everything through. But as she stared at her boots as they crunched through leaves and twigs, she suddenly thought of something that made her insides boil with rage and shame.

Hiccup had been right. She had been so obsessed with perfection that she had excluded her daughter! Adrianna wasn't as talented as Finn in what Astrid enjoyed so she had written her off. The only moments she ever spent with her little girl were ones they both hated. They looked forward to escaping from each other!



And it was her fault. She had pushed her daughter away. And it was the man she was supposed to love that had brought all this to her attention only for her to scoff at him.

Perhaps Hiccup wasn't as far gone as she'd thought. And, she realized with an even more painful twinge of guilt, maybe she was partially responsible for creating the monster he had become.

\* \* \*

><p>On any normal given day, Finn liked to play in the mud. He had adored the squishy texture of filthy grime rubbing between his fingers. He had especially loved to run in the mud with Toothless as a little boy. The dragon would run at top speeds and slide on his haunches until a tidal wave of mud overcame him. That was probably his favorite moment with his father's dragon that he could remember (although his parents were <em>very <em>upset with the duo on that occasion).

Now, however, he decided that he hated mud. His bare feet already bore the blisters and cuts of long days of hard work and no proper clothing on them whatsoever. But the mud only scraped into each blister and dug into every small cut he had. He hoped he would be able to find water sometime that evening to clean the wounds. He would hate to have his feet amputated for such tiny injuries that ended up turning into a gangrene infection.

Wicker basked in the crook of his elbow and a small wooden box at his hip, he hurried along the worn path toward the market. His instructions were simple: buy bread, wine, cheese and fish. Then from the carpenter, trade the freshly picked berries inside the box for a new hammer and a box of nails. Ratri had harshly informed him that the leak in the roof was distinctly the new slave's fault, so he would be fixing it.

Finn sauntered through the market, looking for his listed items. Bread, wine, cheese, fish. Bread, wine, cheese, fish. The red-head found the cheese first, and decided on the stinkiest cheese he could find. The crotchety old man hadn't specified what kind of cheese to buy, so he would just have to cope.

More than likely he'd just beat the boy for his audacity. Granted, Finn was feeling a bit rebellious but he wasn't about to push the man's cane too far. At all actually. He could still feel the lacerations on his back. The one on the back of his neck seared every time he moved, as if to remind him of its presence. He tried not to think of what would happen to Ratri if his parents ever saw his wounds.

Finn mentally slapped himself. Stop thinking about them! They aren't coming! He stepped up to the dock where the fish was sold and chose a couple cod. Surely the man wouldn't mind cod; everyone back home ate cod like it was fresh sweet buns from the village bakery. Next Finn made his way farther into the market in his search for bread. He paid a man for a few decent-sized loaves, and then paused when he considered the tankards of wine. Which should he choose? Again, Ratri hadn't specified what he was to buy. And being a solid 7-years-old, Finn didn't exactly know what was good. He was known for being a little tenacious and rebellious back home, trying new things and

tricks to see how far he could push his parents' line. But he wasn't that dumb.

Not yet anyway.

"Salve, pueri! Quid possum vobis?" A merchant with a large toothy grin leaned over his counter to look at Finn. The boy stared up at him with wide eyes.

"Ermâ€¦ Norse?" The man blinked at Finn awkwardly and he bit back a sigh. Latin it was. "Ehhâ€¦ Mihi opâ€¦ opus estâ€¦ uhhâ€¦ vinum?" \_I need to buy wine.\_

The man raised a large wine bottle with a deeply furrowed brow. "Vinum?" \_Wine?\_

"Etiam. Bonum?" Finn asked. \_Yes. Good?\_

The man huffed in frustration. Stupid slave owners should teach their slaves the language before sending them out to do their shopping. "Et ire iustus pick unum, puer! Non omnes dies!"

Finn stared at him with an open mouth. His vocabulary wasn't that expanded, plus he spoke rather quick. The reddening of his face may have had something to do with itâ€¦

"Ahhâ€¦" Finn grabbed a bottle and lifted it toward the man. "Unus estâ€¦ bonus?" \_This one okay?\_

The man snatched it from his hand, marked it with a piece of charcoal to show it was sold and accepted Finn's argentum coins, known as pecunia. They were an interesting form of money, compared to what they used on Berk. The merchant nearly threw the bottle of wine at him before waving his hand at him with what seemed to be a shooing gesture. When Finn began to walk away he thought he heard the man mutter a few choice terms in Latin, to which he didn't need a translation. It was ironic how one could tell a swear word from almost any language, but he could get lost on the simplest of terms.

\* \* \*

><p>Heather Jorgenson was a patient woman. She spoke to her children slowly and precisely, even when they were acting up. She lost her temper so infrequently that the villagers had no idea what to do with her on the rare occasions when she did. Snotlout, on the other hand, could be rather hot headed, just like his dragon. It was probably a good thing that the couple differed in this respect; otherwise there would be a lot of fighting and very little productivity. But both adult Jorgensons (and even Inga, on some level) had enough of the Haddocks' constant bickering. So when Heather caught sight of Astrid sauntering over, staring at the ground and irritably kicking pebbles away with the toe of her boot, she wanted to flee. Unfortunately, the Haddock matriarch spotted her before she could make her escape.<br>"Heather, wait!" Astrid called, now jogging to catch her friend before she locked herself in the house.

"Astridâ€¦ hey." Heather groaned, taking a deep breath to calm and brace herself.

"Sorry, am I interrupting something?" Astrid asked, looking disappointed and now walking in step with her friend.

"Uhh..." Heather sighed. "No. No you're not. Why don't you come in for a cup of tea or something? The kids are with the Ingermans and Snotlout's out hunting."

"Great, thank you." Astrid smiled weakly, pulling open the Jorgenson front door and allowing Heather to enter before her. "I just needed someone to talk to." She explained nervously.

"Well how could I say no to that?" Heather questioned rhetorically, mainly to herself, as she put the kettle on the fire her Gronckle had ignited.

Astrid was silent, watching her friend's movements as she prepared the tea. There was so much she wanted to ask, to say but nothing seemed to come formulate into words. It was like she was staring at a puzzle and couldn't identify any of the pieces. That annoyed her. The former Hofferson liked having everything under control, knowing everything. However, as Astrid was finally separated from her husband and from her children, she began to reflect over the past two. It was impossible, she noticed Somewhere and somehow, she admitted to herself, she had lost control and her previous stubborn ignorance of that fact lead to the loss of what she valued most. She needed to know how and where it all went wrong. She just didn't know where to start. "Do you and Snotloutâ€¦Do you two ever fight?"

Heather paused in her work. Turning around to face Astrid, she raised an eyebrow. "You do know my husband, don't you?"

"Right, stupid question." Astrid shook her head. Heather resumed her attention to pot of boiling water. The Haddock matriarch hesitated before asking her next question. "Do you and Inga ever fight?"

"Well..." Heather mulled this over for a moment before replying. "To some extent, yes. I mean, she's only three and a half." She turned around to finish making the tea.

Astrid nodded sheepishly. Sitting down, she rested her chin on the palm of her hand. "Heather, am I a bad mother?"

It seemed everyone on the island of Berk had prayed that they would not have to answer this particular question at the present time. Heather, looked up from her boiling pot, and sighed; her shoulders slumped. She hesitated, grudgingly asking the gods why her before returning to her work.

"Recently or in general?" Heather asked nonchalantly, eyeing the container of honey in her hand and promising herself that she would throw some of it into the conversation before delivering the hatchet.

"Well now I know your answer." Astrid murmured. She buried her head in her hands. "I am a terrible mother. Why did I think I could do this?"

"From what I remember, you didn't. It just sort ofâ€¦ happened." Heather turned to face her guest who only glared. She cleared her

throat and glanced at the wall. "Listen, everyone makes mistakes. I've made a fair few. And I mess up with my daughter all the time. But I don't just sit there wallowing in it. I get up and do something about it."

"Yeah, it might be too late for that." The Haddock matriarch grumbled. "I have spent the last two years trying to get my daughter to sound out words and figure out sentences but one day with Gobber and she suddenly knows how to read!" Astrid blurted out.

"But for two years you taught her what ultimately spring launched her. That doesn't make you a bad mom." Astrid sighed heavily, not comforted in the least. Heather focused on her distraught friend as she stared at her skirt. Her heart turned. She wanted to help so badly but Astrid did not listen to reason easily. Suddenly, she had an idea. "Then again, I guess you are right." Astrid's head instantly turned to her. "You have favored one child over the other for years, yelling at the other one when she can't do things the way you want. When your husband takes her under his wing you get upset and yell at him. Astrid, you're not only a bad mother but a bad wife." The Haddock stood to her feet in an instant; her jaw tight and eyes hard. "Oh don't get mad at me." Heather continued. "You're the one who said it. I just agreed."

"But what about the clothes I make and mend? The meals I cook? The household \_I\_ run?! I have provided for my whole family single-handedly!"

"Well you're obviously not doing a good enough job otherwise the family wouldn't be falling apart." Heather folded her arms smoothly.

"You can't pin that on me. Hiccup hasn't done anything to support this family in the past two years besides earn an income."

"Hasn't he? He has protected his children and his wife. For gods' sake, the entire tribe! He has served us and cared for our every need. He put others above himself, even in his state of mental depression. But you were upset that he still hasn't gotten over taking a life."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't tell me you believe his excuse."

"I'm saddened that his own wife doesn't. I seem to remember that you wanted to care for his every need. Yet the one time he solely depends on you, you leave him in the dust. Telling him to get over it." Heather took a step closer to Astrid, her eyes narrowing. "The other day, you mentioned that Hiccup couldn't kill Toothless and fainted afterward. Does that mean \_nothing\_ to you? Gods, Astrid the problem is right in front of you and you refuse to see it. And I know you want to otherwise you wouldn't have come here to talk, now would you?"

Meanwhile, Snotlout walked through the village, his clothes covered in mud with leaves and twigs sticking out in random places, and his face smeared with dirt, but his head held high. He was proud of his kill. The deer was smaller than he hoped, nothing for a grown man to be proud of hunting, but nonetheless, it felt good to have provided for his family. He was just about to walk inside his house when he

heard voices. He leaned against the door to listen.

Astrid's jaw tensed. "I am not the problem as you are so clearly illustrating."

"Oh really? 'Cause what you just said proves my point." Heather paused before continuing. "Why has Hiccup been so angry lately? Why has he been lashing out?" Her friend only glared. "I can't believe I have to explain a man's heart to his own wife! He's angry at himself, Astrid."

"Oh please. You mean to tell me that Hiccup ordering me around, distancing himself from me, running to his own daughter to vent all his thoughts and concerns, practically punishing me, is because he's angry at himself?!"

Heather took another step closer. "You really can't see it, can you? Hiccup has never been a normal Viking, as you should well know. He couldn't kill Toothless and he fainted from the challenge. So then years later when he has to take another man's life, not an animal, a human, a brother and a friend, you think he could easily get over it? You think Hiccup, tender, gentle, peaceful Hiccup, could easily recover from murdering someone?!" Astrid remained silent. "Oh but it gets worse. You don't care. You don't care that your husband is tearing himself apart from the inside out with guilt. You don't care that he gave his very self for your life."

"I do care!" Astrid yelled. "I care for Hiccup very much!"

"No you don't! Hiccup needed you, Astrid. He needed comfort. He needed closure. And you denied him. You told him to suck it up and deal with it. To get over it. No wonder he runs to Addie. She spent days with a madwoman who terrorized her and still does in her dreams. Just like I'm sure Dagur does with Hiccup." Astrid's eyes widened. "That's right. They both are trying to get over nightmares. Of someone playing with their minds and terrorizing them. But what bothers you, is that they depend on each other. And why shouldn't they?! You've haven't given them any other choice. You didn't let them come to you. You told them to deal with it. So they did. The only way they can."

"You always knew what was important. How to distinguish what to do next. Hiccup doesn't. Hiccup is very emotional, as you should well know. He tried to come to you, to get that guidance from you. But you denied him. So he tried to bury it for you, to forget it and 'get over it'. But you know Hiccup can't do that. For instance, he fainted after not being able to kill Toothless. So all that guilt grew inside him, and you kept poking it, like a fire. And when you stir the coals of a fire, it only grows. So how can you blame the fire when it burns you? Astrid, the mess you're in now is your fault."

Astrid, tapped her foot and stared at a wall for a moment, before she turned back to face Heather. "I don't need to hear this from you. I already hear this from my husband and my daughter."

"And why is it that you are so stubborn to not see when you are the one in the wrong?"

"Are you telling me that it's my fault Hiccup had an affair with his own daughter?!"

"Hiccup may not have chosen the best course of action, but you played a part in it all the same."

The Haddock remain silent. "Thank you for your hospitality but I doubt that I'll ever welcome it again." She turned to go.

Snotlout could hear the nearing footsteps. His wife had taken a bold move to put Astrid in her place. He wasn't going to let that go to waste.

As Astrid reached the door, filthy Snotlout entered, a deer hanging over his shoulders.

"Oh, hello, Astrid. What a surprise." he smiled, not out of social courtesy, but because of the look of shock on her face.

"What happened to you?"

Snotlout looked down at himself. "Well, I seem to remember you liking this look on me." Snotlout put a hand on her back and nudged her back into the living area. "Please, don't leave." As he reached the cooking area where his wife was, he slammed the deer on the table in front of her. "Heather, I brought home dinner. It needs to be cut up and cleaned though. I thought you wouldn't mind."

The second Jorgenson stared at the female deer before her. It's long narrow snout so fair and petite. It's dark eyes perfectly rounded and glistening. The utter tranquility across it's facial features. However, a arrow protruded from her chest. The surrounding area was covered and vibrant red blood, staining the fair, soft fur.

Heather's heart broke and her stomach turned. She jerked her head up to Snotlout. "Oh, no. I'm not dealing with this! You killed it, you clean it and gut it!"

"Heather," he sauntered over to a chair and sat down, resting his feet up on the side table, "I went and killed the animal, the least you could do is clean and gut it for me. It's your job."

"\_My\_ job? In what twisted universe is this \_my\_ job?" Heather snapped irritably. "\_You\_ killed it, \_you\_ chop it up. And get that thing off the table. You'll stain the wood!"

"Oh, so you're more concerned about a wooden table than me?" Snotlout simpered.

Heather turned to retaliate when she noticed a sparkle in his eye. He winked. Within a few seconds, she knew what he was doing.

"That's not what I said! Don't put words into my mouth!" she shouted, allowing her voice to echo throughout the house. "Gods, you are \_so\_ inconsiderate!"

"Inconsiderate?" Snotlout jumped up, rising to his full height which amounted to a quarter inch taller than his wife. "I just brought home dinner for you and the kids! I killed for you!"

"Gee thanks. Keeping us alive a week longer. Real accomplishment."

Heather rolled her eyes, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Meanwhile, I mended your clothes and changed your sons' diapers! Where were you then?"

"Getting dinner!" Snotlout threw his arms up in exasperation.

"Yeah, because that's real hard to do. Go out and shoot stuff." she poked his chest with her pointer finger. "You don't have to keep the boys from getting into things or deal with Inga's tantrums!"

"And yet I come home to deal with your tantrums!" Snotlout pushed away her finger.

"You wouldn't have to if you'd just move the darn thing and gut it yourself!" Heather hollered, standing on tiptoe so she was taller than her husband.

"Heather, what's bothering you about this?" Snotlout gestured to the deer. "All you have to do is cut off its head, slice open the belly, break its chest, legs, and neck, wash all the blood off, skin it, and cut up the meat. Honestly, it's not hard to do."

"But it's gross!" Heather bellowed. "And you seem to have forgotten how many diapers I have changed. For boys! Two boys! That makes it even grosser!"

"But Heather, that's the job of a mother. You know that." Snotlout said in a soft, condescending tone. "And it's not gross, you're just squeamish."

"ENOUGH!" Astrid roared, making both Jorgensons jump. "My gods, are you listening to yourselves? Snotlout, Heather is your wife and she does a lot of work raising your children, mending your clothes, cleaning your house, and Thor knows what else! And Heather, Snotlout has fed your family for a week, at the very least, can you thank him before respectfully asking him to gut the stupid thing himself?" her face was beginning to turn red as she spilled a lot of pent up anger, almost none of which was caused by the Jorgensons' quarrel. "All you need to do is show each other a little bit of respect and... and appreciate what you do for... for each other..."

Astrid's face turned beet red as a different realization cascaded over her. Without another word, she stomped out of the house, a hand to her forehead and her shoulders hunched.

Snotlout turned to his wife, a giant grin brightening his face. "Well, do you think it worked?"

"I hope so. Gods, Snotlout, you're a genius, you know that?" Heather threw her arms around him. "Let's hope Astrid sees sense."

"I think she will." Snotlout laughed, picking her up and playfully spinning her around. "So, what are we going to do about the deer."

"What we always do." Heather kissed Snotlout on the cheek before turning back to the carcass. "Hand me the meat cleaver. I've got work to do."

"Is it weird how fascinated you are with animal guts?" Snotlout asked with a chuckle as he handed the sharp object to his wife.

"Probably. But nobody has to know." Heather winked at him. "Now if you go pick the kids up at the Ingermans, I think I'll have most of this done by the time you get back."

"Yes ma'am!" Snotlout exclaimed cheerfully. "Should I look ticked off on the way just in case Astrid is around?"

"If you wouldn't mind." Heather said, happily getting ready to gut the animal in front of her.

\* \* \*

><p>The isle of Maero was much bigger than Berk. It was also more lush, more warm, and, of course, more foreboding. There was an aura to the place that neither Hiccup nor Fishlegs could quite read but they both felt it. Even their dragons seemed to want to turn back when they began to descend.<p>

As they touched down upon its beach, Hiccup took a look around, his eyes narrowed as if he expected someone to jump out and attack him at any second. He almost hoped he'd see the familiar glistening red hair as his son rushed about but he saw no one at all. This did not deter him. He could make someone talk. He had a Night Fury. People tended to listen to a man with a lethal weapon.

As he began to march forward, intent on finding a public place and threatening anyone he saw, Fishlegs grabbed his shoulder.

"The sun is setting. Everyone will be going to bed. We'll have to look in the morning." he said, yanking Hiccup back with a surprisingly strong grasp. "Let's set up camp and get up early tomorrow."

Hiccup glared at his companion but felt that the man was probably right. He was cranky in the way he only got when he was extremely tired.

Within a few minutes, they had managed to set up their tent and get a small fire started. They took out some of the fish they'd bought on Rune and Fishlegs began to cook them over the flames. The duo was silent for a very long time. Hiccup removed a dagger from his belt and began turning it over in his fingers, oddly fascinated with the way the flames' reflection seemed to dance upon the blade, making it look even more lethal than it was.

It was a few minutes before Fishlegs looked up from what he was doing. He opened his mouth to offer Hiccup the fish but froze. He didn't like the way his friend was looking at the dagger. There was a sort of longing in his eyes, the likes of which the burly Viking had never seen before in his life. He gazed at it almost hungrily. He turned the blade over in his fingers, the sharp edges slipping over the tips so closely, it was a wonder he didn't cut himself.

Fishlegs watched his friend for another minute before he simply couldn't take the look anymore. But he didn't want to startle his friend into doing anything... well, anything. Fishlegs very gently placed the pan on the ground beside the fire and slowly twisted his



larger frame until he faced Hiccup. The chief made no movement or recognition that his fellow Berkian had shifted. He continued to stare at the blade, his green eyes almost dark in the setting sun.

Fishlegs parted his lips and spoke just above a whisper.  
"Hiccup?"

Hiccup flinched, his eyes meeting Fishlegs' almost instantly. The expression didn't change, making the burly man squirm uncomfortably under his darkened gaze. But Hiccup smoothly slid the dagger back into its sheath by his boot before lacing his fingers together and staring at the ground between his feet. He made no other movements, eye contact or effort to speak. Fishlegs fully realized he was being ignored because he didn't want to talk. But right now, he didn't care. He needed to talk. Or at least try to get him to talk.

"Are you coming back to Berk?" he asked in a strong voice, trying to at least earn himself a tiny bit of respect.

Hiccup was silent for a few moments. Fishlegs didn't think he'd get a response until he heard Hiccup mutter, "even if I didn't, why would you care? No one else does."

Fishlegs' heart began to pound. "Hiccup, you can't be serious--"

"Why not? I have a son who hates me, a daughter who will when she figures out I'm not who she thinks I am, and, by this point, an ex-wife who doesn't want anything to do with me." Hiccup said in a flat voice.

"So you and Astrid--"

"Signed the papers? Yes. I'm sure by now, she's turned them into the elders."

There was a long pause. Fishlegs couldn't believe what he was hearing. But more than anything, he was beginning to feel incredibly sorry for his friend. The pain he must be going through... he opened his mouth to speak. "I... I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's for the best."

Fishlegs gaped at him. "Tell me this isn't happening."

"It's life Fishlegs! You don't always get what you want!" Hiccup snapped, his voice cold and devoid of any emotion.

Fishlegs fought to keep his voice steady. "So throw it all away? Toss out any chance for reconciliation and forgiveness and second chances--"

"She doesn't want to! Don't you think I've tried?" Hiccup took deep, steady breaths, his hand on his forehead. "I'm tired, Fishlegs. I'm sick of everything. I can't even look my children in the eye and tell them that I love them anymore because no matter what I do, I dishonor them and screw them over for the future. They're better off without me. Trust me, I understand what's going on and what I'm doing."

"So says the man who used to value life over everything else."

"Break those laws and values and you might become the same way." Hiccup growled, gritting his teeth together.

"If you're thinking about what I think you're-"

"Take Finn back to Berk. Make sure he gets there safely. That's your job. I'm still your chief."

There was a ringing silence. Fishlegs gasped. "Y-you, wait, \_what\_? No! I can't stand for this! You-"

"\_You\_ volunteered for this! You wanted to tag along so you're going to do my family one last favor! You'll take Finn back to Berk and you will leave me! Period!" Hiccup shouted, his voice echoing in the still silence of the woods.

Fishlegs fixed his eyes on his chief, his expression firm but not unkind. "If you think your ranking is enough to get me to blindly obey, you are mistaken."

"I don't care what condition I'm in, I don't care what kind of guilt trip you try; I am not going back. They don't need me anymore. I've lost everything near and dear to me, even my own sanity. So why in Odin's good name would I ever go back?" Rather than sounding broken, Hiccup was beginning to sound angry.

Fishlegs sighed. "How about your daughter? You're her hero. And heroes don't talk like this."

Hiccup scoffed, a dark look crossing his face. "Hero..." he mumbled. "She doesn't even know what I did. But once she does, she'll never look me in the eye again."

"If you leave her, you will betray that trust." Fishlegs continued as if his companion hadn't spoken. "And if you have ever loved her, and I mean\_ truly\_ loved her, you could never do that. The Hiccup who cried when he couldn't get her back right away would \_never\_ do that."

"He died a long time ago." Hiccup chuckled humorlessly. "Amazing how nobody noticed but me."

"You haven't been the same, but you didn't die. You're being stubborn-"

"I'm being realistic. And maybe it's time she learned that you can't trust anyone." Hiccup growled, his fists clenched by his sides. "I haven't been able to trust anyone in almost two years, literally. My own wife can't even look me in the eye. All she does anymore is call me useless and a sorry excuse for a man, question why on earth did she ever choose \_this\_?"

"So that's it. You want to turn your family into you." Fishlegs said in a strong, almost bitter sounding voice. "If that's your end game, if those are the kind of people you want them to become, then don't come back. Because you \_don't\_ love them."

Hiccup's eyes widened and for a split second, Fishlegs almost spotted tears. A few blinks obscured them so that it looked like they hadn't existed at all.

"You have done everything you could for your family. For your daughter, you almost died, lost your sanity, Hel, she was stillborn and you revived her!" as he spoke, Fishlegs' heart began to constrict. The man who had done all these things for his little girl, for his family, he had respected that man. And he missed him. But he continued. "And after all that, after everything you have sacrificed, every tear you have shed, every time she makes you smile or makes you proud... you want to throw that away. Don't you tell me you don't love her because I know you do. And I know you love Astrid and Finn and would do all of this for them too." Fishlegs paused for breath as a familiar gurgle emanated from somewhere behind him. " And what about Toothless? What's he going to think if all this suicide mission?"

"I never said this was a suicide mission. Now you're putting words in my mouth." Hiccup said, his voice dead as it had been at the beginning. "What makes you think I won't just travel the world, fly off into the sunset to see distant lands like I wanted to as a kid?"

"Hiccup please, I'm not stupid!"

There was another humorless chuckle. "Again, putting words in my mouth, I didn't say you were."

"Hiccup, if you didn't come back to Berk, if you abandoned them, what kind of people do you think your children would become?" Hiccup stiffened but did not interrupt as Fishlegs continued. "Finn, I'm guessing, would be angry, lash out at everyone. He'd probably get someone killed. We all know how he lashed out when his grandfather died, and he was four. What if you disappeared too?" Hiccup stared at the ground but Fishlegs wasn't finished. "Anna, well, she would spend her life looking for the kind of affection she got from you. She would end up with a man who could get her to do anything for him, if only for a little bit of affection. A little bit of what you used to provide. You want your daughter to be slapped around, abused by a man who would never love her the way you did? Or, gods forbid, a teenage mother?"

Hiccup shakily got to his feet without giving Fishlegs a second glance. He didn't even stop to call his dragon before he bounded into the woods. His companion listened to his footsteps until they were obscured by the distant sounds of the waves crashing on the beach. He sighed. And then he suddenly had an idea. Thanking the gods that they had thought to take along a Terrible Terror, he whistled to her as he got out a bit of parchment. As she flew over, he hastily scribbled out a message to Berk. And as he tied the parchment to her leg, he prayed that it would reach the council in time.

\* \* \*

><p><em>So many credits with this chapter! I would never have written it when I did without the <em>\_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_, who wrote some of it and helped me with dialogue and \_\_\*\*Fritz96\*\*\_\_ who did the same thing, only with different sections. You both killed my writer's block! So thank you! Also a big thank you to \_\_\*\*amyboomerang\*\*\_\_ for

coming up with the archery idea. Brilliant!\_

\_This chapter was PACKED. So I'm sure you've got a lot to say! Hope I didn't keep you waiting too long. Let me just tell you now that I actually completed chapter 14 a while back so that one, at least, will be coming out a lot sooner than the others have been!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

## 12. Heart to Heart

\_We are getting into the really good parts of this story!\_\_ Chapter 14 is where it'll get epic, I think, but we have to get through these first!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Twelve: Heart to Heart<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Stultus factus est puer!" Ratri screamed in Finn's face. The boy flinched, eyes glancing down at the dreaded cane. The man continued to rant while Finn awaited his impending doom. "I send you to buy de simplest of things and you can't even do that! Es a elit!"<p>

The evil man threw the bottle of wine at Finn, making him leap for cover. The bottle shattered on the ground, the deep purple liquid spattering the walls and soaking into the floor. Ratri wrenched the boy back to his feet by the hair, making him cry out and grapple with his master's hands.

"You bring \_dis\_? Dis is no good for me! And dis!" The man snatched the cheese from the wicker basket and shoved it into the boy's face. "You smell dis? Cheese should not be so strong for an old man. Do you want to kill me?"

Finn quickly clamped his mouth shut before he could candidly respond to the rhetorical question, but unfortunately for him, Ratri caught the flash of honesty in his eyes. Sometimes he could curse the sarcastic genes that ran so rampantly through his veins. "Why you filthy little-

"No!" Finn yelped, twisting out of his grip when the cane was raised. He couldn't bear to be beaten again. He just \_couldn't.\_ "Please, I'm sorry! I'll go back and get what you want! But you didn'tâ€¦" Finn dodged the cane again, skidding across the wood on his stomach, vaguely aware of the glass shards underneath his bare skin. "You didn't specify what to buy! Please don't hurt me!" Finn begged, curling into a fetal position with his arms covering his head when Ratri swung down hard and fast.

Ratri swung his cane a merciful three times, but Finn didn't need a mirror to know his back was bleeding. The previous cuts had just scabbed over tooâ€¦ he bit back tears when Ratri dragged him up to face him. Finn was appalled when the ugly man spit in his face and shoved him on his bottom.

"You are piece of dirt and I am sorry I paid for you. Fix de roof while I find new place for you to work. Nequam, minus gratus debellareâ€|" The door slammed behind Ratri, cutting off the rest of his abusive words. \_Worthless, ungrateful little imp\_.

Finn quickly wiped away the offensive spit from his cheekbone and eye with his wrist and quickly wiped it onto the floor. The last few minutes replayed in his mind; the abuse never ended. He bought the items needed as ordered and he still got beaten. Somehow being spat upon was worse than the physical beating. Ratri degraded him as lesser value than the dirt on his shoe, and for what? Because he didn't buy the right kind of cheese.

Emotion surged in his chest at the memory of his voice crying out, begging the man to stay his hand. He had actually \_begged\_. In such a situation it was understandable but for Finn, he hated the thought. He didn't want to be beaten but to bow at the feet at someone and literally beg for mercyâ€| the thought and image replaying in his mind nearly made him vomit. He hated this place. He hated that man. He hated his prospective future.

But most of all he hated himself for getting into this mess in the first place.

\* \* \*

><p>When Fishlegs awoke the next morning, he was relieved to find Hiccup curled up on the other end of the tent. Neither of them knew just how long ago he had arrived but the Hooligan chief had finally succumbed to his exhaustion. Fishlegs almost didn't want to wake him up. Sleeping Hiccup was preferable to surly Hiccup but it wasn't like he would sleep all day. And it was <em>his<em> son, after all, that necessitated the journey in the first place. It wasn't like either of them \_wanted\_ to be there and they suspected that Finn probably shared their sentiments.

Fishlegs gently prodded Hiccup's relaxed form. He was slightly amused to note that his chief didn't snore, which was a definite rarity on Berk among the men. A low groan emanated from the exhausted man but he stirred and forced himself into an upright position, rubbing his eyes and yawning widely. Fishlegs prayed that both of them had gotten enough sleep because he would need all his energy to keep Hiccup from killing someone and Hiccup needed sleep to keep himself from attacking anyone he saw.

Not having ever lived in a house with Hiccup (and it being over two decades since they had spent the night together), Fishlegs wasn't sure if his friend's silence was an indicator of sleep deprivation. But he appreciated the silence all the same. Both men were completely quiet as they wandered around in search of a village or... really \_any\_ fellow human being.

As a small village square came into view, Fishlegs began praying fervently that Hiccup would control his temper. He got out a Latin dictionary he'd brought and began flipping the pages. He needed to learn the words for son, slave, red haired, and, of course, a few apologies just in case Hiccup got violent. Those were more important than anything else.

The first person they happened upon was a young woman. Fishlegs took

a quick moment to thank the gods for this because Hiccup, hot headed as he might be, would never strike her or slam her against the wall the way he had to some of the others they encountered.

The woman began to babble in her native tongue. Fishlegs put up a hand so he could flip through the book.

"Loquere paulatim." he said shakily. \_Speak slowly\_.

The woman obliged. From what Fishlegs could gather, she admired their dragons and their foreign clothes. She also recognized Hiccup thanks to his Night Fury, which they found odd. Hiccup's legacy had extended all the way to Maero? It seemed impossible.

"Ask her if she can tell us where the slave ships docked a few days ago." Hiccup hissed, already beginning to become impatient.

Fishlegs had no idea what he was asking. He fumbled through several pages of translations, knowing he was horribly butchering the words he was saying. However, for some reason, the woman looked delighted.

"Etiam!" she exclaimed. "Et sponsabo te! Dicam igitur de cognatione mea!"

She hurried away before they could say another word. Fishlegs and Hiccup looked at each other.

"You clearly mistranslated." he said flatly before stomping away in search of someone else to interrogate.

\* \* \*

><p>Finn heard the clicking of the cane long before Ratri appeared from the roadway. The sound vaguely reminded Finn of his father's prosthetic leg, the "step <em>thunk<em>" of his father's gait originally a sound of comfort. Over time it grew to be an irritation because it meant his father was home and it was time to begin the day's daily argument. Ergo, go upstairs and hide in his bedroom, or go find a friend to play with. Now the clicking instilled in him a sense of dread and fear, and what the boy wouldn't give to hear his father's footsteps again. He'd probably cry with relief.

But that wasn't going to happen and he wasn't going to dwell on it. No, he needed to get as many tiles nailed to the roof as possible, and do it as accurately as he could. This was a difficult feat as he'd never been on a roof before, let alone \_fixed\_ one. His mom would be yelling at him to "come down this instant, Fearless Finn Haddock!" while his father would scramble around for a ladder and scream "don't panic, buddy, I'm coming!" He'd probably proceed to trip over his own feet in his hurry to save his son. And his little sister would be bouncing on the balls of her feet, looking terrified, until he came down safely.

Finn paused when he realized he was smiling at the thought. He slammed the hammer into the roof angrily, willing himself to stop thinking of home and family and hot meals and clothing...

"You better not put hole in my roof! I take my cane to your hide!"

Back facing the old man, Finn rolled his eyes. "Nothing I haven't received yet anyway," he muttered under his breath.

"What you say to me?"

Finn gave the man a genuine smile. "There was a bee!"

Ratri eyed him suspiciously. Finn thought he seemed to be debating on whether or not to throw his cane at the lad, but was figuring out with his very small, peanut-sized brain that he'd have to limp around to fetch it. Or rather Finn would have to retrieve it. The boy mentally sighed; he couldn't win no matter what his mind concocted.

The old man finally huffed. "Come down. Quickly!" Finn scrambled for the top of the ladder, thankful that he wasn't afraid of heights. He never really had been thanks to those early dragon rides with Poppy all those years ago. He was sure his namesake had something to do with it however.

When he stood in front of Ratri with a suspicious, yet submissive gaze, the man scrutinized him for a moment. Then he nodded. "Yes, I think you do just fine there. You learn respect quick or flogged. Understand?"

Finn bit his tongue hard and forced himself to nod and bow low. His mind screamed that he was basically already flogged in this awful place, but to speak so disrespectfully would only give Ratri the reason, and satisfaction, to beat him. However, the prospect of a new workplace gave him hope. If the consequences for mishaps were flogging then it couldn't be a great job, but anywhere other than here with this vile piece of scum was a blessing.

Ratri pulled a long thin chain off his belt and hooked it and a shackle around Finn's right wrist. He then turned toward the road without another word, tugging Finn after him. This was another thing about slavery that he despised: the humiliation of being chained like a common criminal and dragged off to who knows where to do who knows what, and he couldn't even use the \_outhouse\_ of his own free will. It was degrading beyond comprehension.

He had seen other slaves: big, burly men in their thirties and forties. How long had they been in this madness? Since they were his age? He couldn't imagine being a slave for that long. The Hooligans' young people came of age at 17 and most were married and had a profession by age 25. Finn had been in line to be the next chief, so he only assumed he'd have to pick a wife by his early twenties, get married, have kids, and become chief when his father stepped down. It was tradition, but it was also his duty as heir to the chiefdom.

Now he didn't know what would happen. With only a loincloth on his young frame, a small rag to keep warm at night, and a small cup of water and a few crackers as a meager once-a-day meal, Finn couldn't honestly comprehend where he would be in ten years. Hel, he couldn't see himself in one year, let alone a decade. He still had a lot to learn and a lot to get used to, beatings aside. He had to learn his place in this new world, that much he agreed with Ratri. He had to learn some respect to an extent. It was going to be a challenge to respect those who didn't respect him. To be treated like an animalâ€¦

less than an animalâ€¦ gods, how could he ever learn to respect these people who didn't even allow him to preserve his own dignity?

These and other thoughts continued to plague Finn's mind as he was practically dragged through the village. He paid the people no heed, chose to completely ignore the few sympathetic glances he received. Those who pitied him didn't pity him enough to help him in his plight, let alone offer him food or water. They wouldn't step up, so he didn't bother with sad, pitiable looks to get sympathy with the hopes that \_someone \_would help. No one crossed a slave owner, especially Ratri. No discussion made, no questions asked. He had learned that one before he was even sold.

Pity. He hated the looks and the hated the humiliation of being the center of attention when circumstances weren't favorable. He wanted to slap the people who managed to catch his eye just for the sake of giving him a single look that meant "I'm sorry for your current predicament; here, have a dash of pity for your trouble. I hope it helps your day shine brighter." Nobody had souls in this land.

At last they got through the village and Ratri led him through the nearby woods. Another ten minute walk and Finn could hear the clinking of metal against rock. Soon the base of the mountains came into view and the boy could see slaves of all shapes, sizes and colors milling about. Some carried heavy buckets full of rocks, some were panning water in a small creek nearby, others were sharpening blades. Almost all of them were male; the only women were panning in the water. Dust clouded the air by horses and donkeys pulling carts filled with capped barrels.

Finn jerked out of his reverie when Ratri yanked on the chain, dragging him forward so hard that he tripped and stumbled onto the ground. Ratri rested his cane on the base of his neck, making his spine tense. He wondered if his blood was caked on the crutch, but he didn't dare move. Moments later a pair of sandaled feet stood before him. Ratri began speaking to him in fast Latin. Finn couldn't understand a word, but he assumed they were talking about him and an agreement. Ratri tapped his back a few times with the cane and Finn heard bits about his uselessness and terrible work ethic at home. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The man standing in front of Finn chuckled deeply and dragged the boy to his feet. The man leered in his face, examining his muscles. He gave him a toothy grin and said something to Ratri, making Finn nearly gag. The stench of stale alcohol reeked on the man's breath and it was all he could do not to throw up on the man's shoes.

Ratri seemed to sigh with relief and, after removing the shackle from the boy's wrist, shoved him forward. "You work hard or they beat you and I beat you. I send Benen to get you at nightfall."

Finn could have sighed with relief; he liked Benen. He was the nicest, sweetest old man the boy had ever met, given his situation. He only wanted to learn more about the man's story; perhaps he could ask more questions if they were alone, away from their master. Finn knew Ratri had bought a new, young slave partially because of Benen's old age. The thought continued to sadden him. The old man worked so hard and so well, yet he was treated like garbage. Finn would have to ask him how he had survived all these years.

The new man grabbed his elbow and yanked him toward the cave



entrances. Finn pulled against the hard grip but he only tightened his grip. Finn glanced up at him and decided to take a chance. He tried to bend low as far as he could, difficult while walking. "Sir? I promise I won't run away, as if I could go very far if I triedâ€¦ could you lighten your grip?"

He was relieved for a split second when the man removed his arm completely, but he was shocked when the hardest slap he had ever experienced erupted across his face. He pulled a hand to his cheek and tried not to cry out at the stinging sensation. He vaguely heard laughing from the harsh workers and even a few fellow slaves. Why would they be laughing? Probably because this was their lot in life, no more. They were used to all this and it was normal; it was life. They had no hope.

The man pulled him close and seethed in his face, "Ye'll speak when spoken to, slave. Now get in dere." The man nearly threw Finn into the cave's entrance. Finn stumbled a few steps before regaining his balance, fingertips brushing the floor in case he fell. He didn't want massive scrapes on his chest and belly on top of everything else. Many men worked tirelessly along the walls of the cave. After staring into the darkness before him, he turned back toward the entrance.

The man stomped forward with a small pickaxe in hand and nearly threw it at Finn. "You will work with Holt here. He is de lead for de slaves in this part of de cave. You answer to him and if you mess up, he turn you in to me. If he does not, he is flogged. If you make mistake enough, you are flogged. If you try to escape-"

"I'll be flogged?" Finn asked boldly, yet sounded innocent.

The man raised a brow, recognizing Ratri's description of disrespect coming from the boy. But he was young and he would learn quickly; for a 7-year-old he was already strong and burly. He would be a good, hard worker. It wouldn't do to beat him senseless before he even started working.

Finn watched the man's mental contemplation with an innocent gaze. He visibly relaxed when the man continued to speak, "Holt will tell you what to do. I leave now." Finn watched the man leave before a rough hand grabbed his shoulder and nearly shoved his nose into a rocky corner. The boy's eyes widened when he saw the glistening rocks peeking out from the stone sediments. Diamonds. This was a mine.

Holt pointed at the pickaxe and at the rock wall, gesturing for him to begin picking. When Finn stared at it for another moment, wondering how he should begin, the man pushed his shoulder. Holt waved his arms at him in annoyance with a low grunt. Finn's brows furrowed and he began picking at the rock slowly. He had no idea what he was doing.

Luckily Holt huffed and pushed him aside. He picked at the rock surrounding the diamond with ease and careful hands. Finn quickly realized that the end goal wasn't just to get the diamond out of the rock, you had to get it out in one piece. Finn was a tough little guy, but he was known for breaking things. Oh boy.

He could only imagine the consequences for breaking expensive

rockâ€|

Holt stood back to give him a scrutinizing gaze before pointing at the rock again. After a moment of keeping eye contact with the man, Finn furrowed his brow. He opened his mouth and paused, hoping he wouldn't be hit for speaking. But he decided to take a chance, just be quieter this time around.

"I understandâ€|" he whispered. "But why aren't you speaking? Do they beat you for speaking too?"

Without warning the man opened his jaw as wide as it would go and Finn jumped back with a squeak of fear. The man's tongue was completely gone, only a jagged scar filling the void where the muscle should have been. Finn felt the blood drain from his face. He would never speak out of turn again.

Holt closed his mouth with an audible snap, giving the boy a cold glare that spoke volumes. Don't talk. Do his job. Stay alive. That's all he could do. With another hard push toward the wall, Holt stood and retreated to his own work space without another glance. Finn quickly began picking at the stone with a fervor he hadn't had before, the image of Holt's roomy mouth flashing through his mind. He continually glanced over his shoulder as he worked as if waiting for someone to apprehend him and force his own jaw open. With a sharp shake of his head he attempted to clear his mind. He needed to do this job well in order to protect himself. There really was no telling what would happen to him if he screwed up. He couldn't afford to mouth off here; he couldn't afford to make mistakes here.

He began to wonder if working for Ratri wasn't so bad after allâ€|

Finn chipped away until he finally managed to pull a fist-sized diamond out of the rock. He stared at it in wonder, curious as to how much money was in his hand. But he quickly plunked it into the bucket of other gems beside him. He wouldn't be beaten for thinking about stealing, not that he would anyway. He only wore a loincloth; where exactly would he hide it?

Finn looked toward the mouth of the cave when loud angry shouts could be heard. His jaw dropped when he saw it was nearly sunset. Had he really been in there that long? The angry shouts echoed when the bickering men walked inside, Latin words spewing a mile a minute. Finn tensed when he saw one charge toward him and grab his arm. Finn nearly had to slap a hand over his mouth to keep from speaking; he didn't want to get slapped if he could help it.

"Dis one, dis boy es new, ya? He will look for my mine carts!"

"He is new worker! Needs to work!" the other man argued from the cave entrance.

"Excuses! I use him as worker and he continue when finished with me!"

"Argh! FINE! But if I get flogged, you will be flogged with me!" The man at the front stomped back into the sunset, the dust of the earth clouding at his every step. Finn had no time to think before his assailant yanked him toward the bowels of the cave.

"Now you listen to me, boy, there comes a time in a man's life when he needs his three mine carts back! And that time is now!"

Finn bit his lip as he was dragged into the darkness. "P-permission to speak, sir?"

The man growled in annoyance. "What!"

"Ermâ€¦ Why are they missing?"

"Because people are fools!"

Well that certainly answered his question. Quite the intellectual, this one. "Where will I find them?"

"In the cave, of course! Stupid boy!" The man stopped to light a torch before nearly tossing it into his hands. "You have one hour to find it before we come in after you and you will be flogged for taking too much time. We will beat you until you won't even be recognizable. Yes, you must bring all three mine carts back in that hour. I need them and I will have them, or else! No more questions! GO!" The man romped away before Finn could ask any more questions.

Finn thought, as he stepped into the cave, that perhaps the man was exaggerating when he described his need for his mine carts as a bizarre time in his life... unless, of course, it was like his mother's grouchy weeks once a month. If that was the case, Finn hoped this phase would be one that he would never experience.

The boy wandered through the cave halls, following the tracks and raising the torch over his head so he could see better. A few rats chattered to each other at the offensive light, but scurried away at the human's presence. Finn's stomach rumbled in the darkness, echoing across the walls. It was eerie and cold and dirty inside the cave, the dust swirling from his ankles up toward his face to make him cough. His throat felt parched within minutes and the dust burned his eyes. This was no place for a boy; he sounded like he had been smoking a pipe for years already.

A fork in the cave emerged from the inky shadows before long and he paused. Turning toward the tunnel he was coming from, he chipped a large X to mark his path. He didn't know how big this cave was and didn't want to risk getting lost or depend on his footprints for his sole plan. Who knew if they would last? He wasn't taking any chances. Facing forward again, he chose the right tunnel. Finn huffed when he realized he'd probably been walking a good ten to fifteen minutes. How would he possibly get back to the front in time with three mine carts? If fate was feeling generous today, how would he know which three to grab if he just happened upon a tunnel full of mine carts?

Yes, he was sure to be flogged by nightfall. He didn't exactly know what "flogging" was, but he didn't need to ask questions to understand that it was not a pleasant experience. Or else people wouldn't threaten him so much.

Finn switched arms for holding the torch when he couldn't stand the ache any longer. He saw the curve in the tunnel ahead of him and

that's when he saw the gentle hue of the sunset. His eyes spotted a random five-foot-tall space inside the wall a few feet to his left. It wasn't very deep or very tall, but the space stuck out in his mind for some reason. Yet he shrugged and walked faster into the curve. He was stunned to find an exit, the mine tracks continuing on into the lush greenery of the forest.

Finn paused in his tracks. The temptation was great and it was all he could do to not run headlong into the dense forest. He would be free, he would be alone with no more threats hanging over his headâ€” but he wasn't stupid. Freedom like that wouldn't last long and running away surely had its consequences. He'd probably be flogged or have his tongue cut outâ€” or maybe even killed on sight. These and other terrible potential repercussions flew rampantly through his mind until he twisted on his heel and walked resolutely back into the cave. He didn't want to die. Not so brutally at any rate. If Odin would take him, he wanted to go in his sleep. No pain involved. Ironically he used to joke with his friends the petty phrase, "no pain, no gain". He despised the meaning of that phrase now.

Finn found himself back at the fork and instantly walked into the left tunnel, now on his right. It wasn't five minutes before he spotted three mine carts sitting in the middle of the tunnel. He stared at them for a moment in surprise, wondering why in the world they would have been left there. With a shrug of indifference, he walked toward the furthest cart and gave it a hefty shove. He sincerely hoped he wouldn't have to push each cart back to the surface one by one. Fate was blessing him in that moment when the carts merely gave a rusty screech of indignation when the wheels turned, shooting high-pitch reverberations through the tunnel halls. Finn's arm hair stood on end at the noise, like nails on a chalkboard, yet was pleased to note that all three carts were moving. He set the torch in a notch on the mine cart and kept pushing. Within another five minutes he had pushed the trio of carts back toward the entrance, the owner already standing there awaiting his arrival with crossed arms.

Finn smiled at him triumphantly, yet the man merely pushed him aside. "Took you long enough. You barely made it on time." Finn quickly recovered from the scowl that jumped to his voice, but thankfully the man didn't notice. He looked down at him and waved him out toward the cave entrance. "Your fellow slave is waiting outside for you. Go before I change my mind and flog you anyway."

Finn nodded and bowed low before retreating toward the cave entrance. He purposefully avoided anyone big and strong, careful to protect himself from anyone who would hurt him on purpose. His face nearly lit up when he saw Benen standing with folded hands by the tree line. The elderly man waved him forward with quick movements and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder when he stood before him.

Benen gave him a patient smile and clicked his tongue. "Immunditiam."  
\_Dirty.\_

Finn sighed heavily. "Don't I know it."

Benen chuckled and pulled him into his side, arm draped over his shoulders as they walked back to Ratri's house. Benen didn't seem to be in any particular hurry, though they didn't dilly dally. Ratri would be furious if they took too long to get back, but the elderly

man seemed to enjoy the evening stroll as he stared up at the twinkling stars. Finn also enjoyed the beautiful sight at the now purple sky, thinking of his sister and her love of the color. He even remembered the days when he would dream of flying above the clouds to touch the sky. But those dreams were only memories, and he couldn't take the silence for much longer.

"Do you speak Norse?" he blurted out.

Benen cast him a warning sidelong glance, but nodded. "Yes." his voice was a little hoarse and thin, but held some strength. "Mostly Latin."

"How long have you been?" Finn paused.

"A slave?" Benen finished quietly. "Nigh on forty years now."

"Forty?!" Finn exclaimed.

Benen grasped Finn's shoulder and pulled him closer. "Hush boy. Slaves are not supposed to speak. Best to remain silent." Finn nodded in apology. He listened to the crickets and frogs chirping in a nearby pond while waving away the irritating mosquitoes plaguing them. He really didn't want mosquito bites on top of his other injuries.

"My village was raided when I was eighteen." Benen interrupted the silence with a calm, collected voice. Finn listened to his story with interest. "The harvest would begin within a fortnight. I was to be married the following spring to my lovely Aida." Benen sighed. "I was brought here and bought by Ratri all those years ago. I never saw my bride or my home again."

"What?" Finn gasped, stopping in his tracks. Benen released his shoulders and faced him. "You've been here?" Seriously, you have been here for forty years?" Benen nodded and anger boiled in Finn's chest. "But that's not fair! Why haven't they let you go? After all this time, I've seen how hard you work! You should be free by now—"

"No, lad." Benen gently placed a hand on his shoulder. His blue eyes burned into his own, yet shown with kindness and compassion. "I understand your thoughts and feelings. Odin knows I have felt them my whole life. But I am alive. Why should I question or ask for more than I have?"

"Because you deserve better." Finn clenched his fist at his sides. "You were stripped from your home, I—" he faltered and looked at the dirt. "I ran away. I hated my home and my family, so I left. And now I can never go back." Finn looked him in the eye again. "I hate it here more than anything, but at least I put myself here so I have to cope with my screw ups. But you, you should be free! You don't deserve to be here, Benen!"

Benen smiled at the boy's maturity, knowing full well he didn't understand the implications of his own words. He was a good, strong lad. He had a fire and a passion inside that refused to die. He admired that. "Sometimes we don't understand why things happen the way they do. Things don't always make sense. If they did, where would

be the adventure? The surprise? The redemption from mistakes made?"

Finn scowled at the scabs covering his body. "This isn't the adventure I originally hoped for."

Benen chuckled. "Me neither. This wasn't the life I wanted, not by a long shot. Do I still dream of my beautiful fiancée, who surely moved on and married another man? Of course I do. But I still treasure every memory of her that I have. Every good time, every hard time, every single moment. Even though it has hurt over the years, I don't regret it. It isn't pleasant where I have been all my life and the things that have happened to me. But I cannot look at my life and say it was a waste. I have learned through many a trial to let go of the past and live for the moment as I only can." The elderly man raised Finn's chin to regain eye contact. "Laborandum, bene vivere." "Work hard, live well."

Finn sighed, brushing his bangs out of his eyes. "It's so hard."

"I know lad. I am sorry you are here. But while you still have me, learn from me. I've still got some time left in these old bones. Don't give up yet and don't despair. You will learn quickly." Benen smiled and pulled him back into their walk. "Now, we must walk quickly if we are to arrive home soon."

"Home," Finn scoffed. "Such a different look than what I'm used to."

Benen nodded in agreement. "Tell me about it."

Finn paused, unsure if he should indulge the thoughts. But Benen recognized that he was a chatty boy by nature with a fiery personality, just like his mother. He wouldn't be allowed to speak again for a very long time, so best get it all out now. Or as much as possible anyway. He was sure Benen wanted to know more about his new "co-worker" besides. He launched into a long tale of his old home; he told Benen of Berk and his father's work since he was a teenager with establishing dragons as equals and friends. He told him of his father's status as chief and how he was supposed to take over one day. He told Benen about his beautiful mother who he missed dearly. He even told Benen about his annoying twin sister, though he refrained from telling him all the annoying parts. He had to admit that he truly missed her too. He spoke of his parents' dragons and Gobber and some of his friends that he played with. He talked about the things he liked to do and the training he had been working on. He talked about anything and everything that came to mind.

He was sad when Ratri's house at last came into view. Finn finally grew silent as the memories faded and reality washed upon him. A small distance away from the house, Benen pulled Finn to a short stop and rested his hands on his shoulders. "Berk sounds like a lovely home. I pray you will see it again someday, and your family."

Finn shrugged. "I doubt it."

"Now don't go making assumptions. There is always hope."

"You've been here for forty years, Benen. Is there hope for you

too?"

"If I have to wait fifty years to be free and I am going on year forty-two, wouldn't it be worth the wait?" Benen asked. Finn was speechless; how could the man honestly be so optimistic? He hoped one day he too could be like that.

Benen smiled and gave him a short hug. Finn appreciated the gesture very much and was thankful he had this time to talk. He did feel a little better after talking about home and knowing that Benen now knew his past. If there was one thing he could be thankful for, it was meeting Benen. Somehow he realized he wouldn't want give up this new friendship for the world.

If only he could see how truly thankful Benen was for this passionate little boy who had been so suddenly dropped into his lonely life.

\* \* \*

><p>Adrianna returned to the village at dusk with a smile on her face. In simply one day, she had figured out how to read. It appeared that all the word lists and reading lessons had helped quite a bit more than she'd realized. But shooting at words was fun and she was getting much better the more she practiced. Gobber had told her, toward the end of the lesson, that she was almost ready for <em>flaming<em> arrows. This thought excited her immensely. She had never felt so accomplished.

As she said goodbye to Gobber and headed to the Larsons', she found her mother sitting on their front steps. She was accompanied by Ruffnut, who was holding on to a strap attached to Bosley's shirt to keep the toddler from staying too far. At first, Adrianna had been appalled that Ruffnut and Fishlegs used a leash for their young son but after the boy had run off and nearly gotten himself killed on multiple occasions, she was glad that they did. Bosley grinned when he saw her. He liked the blonde girl who sometimes gave him little sweets. She grinned back.

"Anna, I wanted to talk to you." Astrid said by way of a greeting. Adrianna stopped walking and gave her mother a suspicious gaze. "You're not in trouble. I just have some things I wanted to tell you. Can we take you to Poppy's old house to talk?"

The girl hesitated for a moment before nodding. Ruffnut scooped up her little son and followed the mother and daughter from a distance. She wasn't interested in listening in on their conversation (seeing as it would probably be about \_feelings\_ and she didn't like listening to people talk about those) but, as Horst had said, Astrid couldn't be trusted alone with her daughter. When the female Haddocks entered the house, she remained outside so she could work on mending some of her family's clothes. With five children, there was always a lot of mending to do.

Astrid beckoned to Stormfly and pointed to the fire pit, which still had some logs from the last fire a visitor had set. The dragon lit it and then lay down next to it, enjoying its warmth. She peered at the blonde humans as they sat in silence for a while, watching the fire rage on. Adrianna liked how people looked when a fire was the only source of light. It was a bit eerie but it was a good kind of eerie.

"Anna," Astrid began with a sigh. "I am so sorry."

Adrianna's head snapped up and she stared at her mother. Astrid gently placed an arm around the girl's shoulders and was deeply thankful that she didn't flinch.

"I was being stubborn. I shouldn't have made you read all those lists. I shouldn't have turned you away when you wanted to come with Finn and me." Astrid squeezed her daughter's shoulder. There was no way she could ever apologize for every way she had hurt her little girl but she was determined to try. "I should have tried to spend more time with you. And ask what you wanted to do instead of insisting on doing things my way. And Anna?" she waited until she was staring into a pair of piercing green eyes whose resemblance to Hiccup's just about broke her heart again. "I am so sorry that I slapped you."

Adrianna paused for a moment, allowing all of this to sink in. There was a question laying heavily on her mind, one that she never would have dared ask her mother before. But if Astrid was truly sorry, it was worth the risk.

"Why don't you love me as much as Finn?" she asked timidly. "Did I do something wrong?"

Astrid's heart broke for a completely different reason. She could feel her eyes begin to sting but several blinks pushed down the feeling.

"I don't love Finn more than you." she said, her voice steady but her arm shaking slightly. "But I wanted to spend more time with him because he's more like me. Kind of like you're more like your dad." Except now, Astrid thought, but she wasn't about to say that out loud. "In fact... I know you love your dad more than you love me."

Adrianna's eyes widened. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed, sounding quite adamant. "I love you very much. But you didn't want to spend time with me. And I didn't want to make you."

This had sufficiently weakened Astrid's defenses. She felt as if her broken heart squeezed a tidal wave of tears out of her eyes. And she wasn't about to stop them now. She heard a short gasp come from her daughter and moments later, she felt the girl's gentle touch as she tried to wipe away the offending tears.

"Please don't cry, mommy." she said, now sounding quite distraught. "I'm sorry I said that. I shouldn't have said that."

"No." Astrid sniffled a few more times, pulling her daughter in closer. "No, you were right. And you shouldn't apologize for telling me how you feel."

"So... why are you crying?"

Astrid took a deep breath before answering. "Because I love you. And I hurt you. And I didn't know how much I'd hurt you until now." she wiped her eyes. "I know what it feels like to want to be loved by someone and never getting it. I just never thought I was doing that



to you."

"But you don't have to cry." Adrianna placed a hand on her mother's chin and turned her face so that they were looking at each other. The vivid green hue made Astrid's heart twinge once more. "I forgive you. Besides, I wasn't being very nice either."

Astrid breathed a laugh, helping her daughter wipe the tears off her face. "I think we both messed up. And we owe it to each other to try again."

"Okay." Adrianna nodded. "How?"

Thankfully, the tears finally stopped pouring out of Astrid's eyes so her mind was slightly clearer. "How does your dad make you feel special?" she hated talking about Hiccup but it was a legitimate query.

The girl shrugged. "He just does. But I don't want you to do the same things he does. Because that's daddy. And you're not daddy."

"No." Astrid said, pushing down the bitter feelings threatening to surface. "No, I'm not."

There was a long silence. Mother and daughter watched the fire for a while, occasionally glancing at Stormfly, who was lying on her back and thoroughly enjoying it.

"You don't call me something special." Adrianna said quietly, almost under her breath. "I like how daddy calls me something different from what other people call me. It's like how only Finn and me call you mommy. Because you're only mommy to us."

"Oh." Astrid sighed. "Your daddy's been calling you Addie since you were a baby."

"You don't have to call me something special." Adrianna shook her head. "Never mind."

"No." Astrid placed her head on top of her daughter's. "You're right... Adri."

She didn't see the glimmer of delight in her little girl's eyes but she didn't have to. She could tell that she had made some definite progress. And now that she said the nickname aloud, she liked it much better than Anna. How come she hadn't used it before?

"How about we do something tomorrow? Just you and me." Astrid suggested after some more silence.

"No word lists?" Adrianna asked.

At first, Astrid felt the familiar pang of guilt... but then she realized her daughter was making a joke. Adrianna was funny. She'd never even noticed but now that she thought about it, she could recall several incidents in which her little girl had made a quip and she'd told her to be quiet. And now she was thinking about it, was Adrianna the only person who had been able to make Hiccup laugh over the last few months? Her and Toothless must have been the only good things in his life at the time.

"No." Astrid smiled after a pause to collect her thoughts. "No word lists."

\* \* \*

><p>Yet again, Fishlegs had the unfortunate job of yanking Hiccup off of the men he interrogated and apologize to them. It had taken them the entire day but they had finally been told that a little boy with red hair had, in fact, been bought. But no one would tell them by whom. So it was all Fishlegs could do to keep the villagers alive and Hiccup from killing another person. He'd be impossible to deal with if he did.<p>

It took them most of the day to track down someone who knew the man who had bought Finn. Fishlegs thanked every god he could think of that the person who was providing this information was a woman.

"Name is Ratri." she said in a thick accent. "Live on other end of island. Down path next to house there. Is cruel man. Will not sell."

"I'll take my chances." Hiccup growled, turning on his heel and marching down the path to which the woman referred.

"Thank you." Fishlegs said kindly, keeping an eye on Hiccup's retreating back.

"He look like Zebah. He was good man. They family?" the woman asked.

Zebah... that name sounded vaguely familiar... "No." Fishlegs replied. "I've never heard of him."

"He was good man. If you find, send home." the woman said before turning and walking away.

Fishlegs didn't have time to ponder this information before hurrying after his friend. Thoughts of this mystery man would have to wait.

\* \* \*

><p>Either Adrianna was a genius or she had learned to read long ago but refused to do so out of defiance. Whatever the reason, Astrid was happy that her daughter was reading now. She was still a bit behind her peers but at least now she stood a chance of catching up. The mother was thankful that she and her daughter had made amends. In fact, they were so affectionate that Ruffnut decided she was sick of them and went home. Astrid and Adrianna went home hand in hand. Their problems weren't quite over yet but they were certainly making progress.<p>

Astrid quite glad she'd thought of picking up some books from the records building before meeting with her daughter. She'd found a story about dragons that looked promising and had been curious about a book on traveling performers. Adrianna chose the book on performers and was enthusiastic to read it out loud to her mother.

"And then," she read slowly, making sure she dictated each word

clearly, "they were joined by the es... esc... es-ca..."

"Let me see." Astrid said, bending over and looking over her daughter's shoulder. "Escapologist."

The girl suddenly dropped the book. "Escapologist?" she repeated, her voice rising almost fearfully. Her eyes were wide with terror. Her hands were shaking. Her heart began to drum against her ribs. "I d-don't want to r-read this book."

"Adri-"

"NO!" the girl suddenly shrieked, lifting the book and throwing it across the room. "I won't read it! Don't make me read it!"

"What's the matter?" Astrid got on her knees in front of her daughter. "Adri, tell me what's the matter."

Adrianna shut her eyes tight and shook her head profusely. She hugged her knees in front of her body and buried her face into them. It was as if Astrid wasn't there at all.

Astrid's heart pounded so hard, it almost hurt to breathe. Her daughter was having an... an episode of sorts, the likes of which she hadn't seen in years. Adrianna acted a lot like this in the months after what happened with Trista but these little moments had stopped coming... hadn't they? What had brought it on now? What did the word 'escapologist' have to do with anything? The girl had never even seen an escapologist perform so how could she be reacting so strongly to the mere mention of the profession?

"Adri, please look at me. What's wrong?" Astrid grasped her daughter's shoulders, wishing more than ever that Hiccup was there. "Talk to me!"

Good gods, was this what Hiccup was referring to when he told her their daughter still had nightmares? Why hadn't she listened? Why had she ever ignored her little girl?

"ADRI!" she shouted, shaking her shoulders.

Adrianna's head slowly lifted, her eyes slightly unfocused. "Daddy?"

"It's me." Astrid whispered, gently brushing the girl's bangs from her face.

Adrianna looked around the room for a moment as she appeared to return to reality. She looked at her mother for a few seconds.

"I want to go to bed." she said in a dead sort of voice, her voice devoid of any emotion.

"But we were read-"

"I'm want to go to bed." the girl repeated, this time sounding slightly firmer.

Astrid opened her mouth but no sound came out. What could she say? Was she allowed to ask what had upset her daughter? Would something

trigger another flashback? Hiccup would know. But he wasn't there, of course. Never was there when he was needed, it seemed. Astrid pushed down these angry feelings and focused on her daughter.

"Okay." she muttered, afraid of speaking at normal volume for fear that she would upset her child. "Do you need me to-"

"I want to be alone." Adrianna interrupted.

Astrid nodded and watched as her little girl climbed the staircase and disappeared from view. She turned back to the book, almost afraid of what she would find. But a quick read through left her just as confused as before. It was a simple story about a group of performers who decided to do their own thing until the big performance, when they realized they needed to rely on each other. A simple tale with a happy ending. Absolutely nothing frightening at all.

So why had Adrianna reacted the way she had? Astrid sighed deeply. She really hated to admit it but she needed her husband. Even the angry shell of her husband would do. Someone who had any insight whatsoever. She briefly thought of going to see Erick but she didn't want to leave her daughter alone. Her daughter who was still suffering. Her daughter whose pain could have been prevented if, perhaps, she'd had a more supportive mother...

Never in her life had Astrid had never felt like more of a failure. But now she knew where she had gone wrong, perhaps she could begin to turn things around. Perhaps she could still be the mother her daughter needed.

She looked up prayed to the gods that it wasn't too late.

\* \* \*

><p><em>This chapter was insane. Even though it didn't take nearly as long to write as the last one, it's quite a bit longer and has so much more crammed in. I know you have questions!<em>

\_A gigantic thank you to \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for writing a big section of this chapter. And to a little known game called \_\_\*\*The Cave\*\*\_\_ for the inspiration for the mine carts quest and one of the lines in the story. It's a great game that I highly recommend to those who like puzzle games!\_

\_The exciting parts of this story are so close! Including one big, exciting scene I've been looking forward to sharing for over two months! The updates, as promised, should be a lot more frequent now!\_

\_Don't forget to leave a review!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

\_P.S. My sister wanted to add that she thinks my readers complain more than the 3-year-olds she works with. I think this is mostly in response to the divorce outrage but I thought it was a funny comment.\_

\_I apologize to all those who complained about the previous chapter's length. I'm not going to say it won't happen again but I can see how it might be frustrating. I hope this is the last story that branches off into more than two different things going on but I can't make any promises. Also, there will be a rather colorful word in this chapter, just warning you now. And here we go!\_

\* \* \*

### ><p><strong>Chapter Thirteen: The Memory Tree<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Adrianna seemed to have gotten over her outburst the night before. In fact, Astrid was a bit unnerved when the girl got out of bed as cheerful as ever and pretended nothing had happened at all. But the mother wasn't about to ask what was wrong. The last thing she wanted was yet another breakdown on her hands. So when the girl suggested that they take a long walk, Astrid immediately agreed, thinking that maybe she could get the information she so dearly wanted.<p>

Stormfly thought that her human and the female young were spending a \_lot\_ of time together lately. Certainly more than her human was spending with \_her\_. She made the split second decision to tag along. The girl seemed comforted by the presence of a large reptile and Astrid thought that anything that made her daughter feel safe was definitely worth the irritated snorts and prods in the back as they walked. But mother and daughter paid her no heed.

"What sort of things do you like to do with your dad?" Astrid asked after a few minutes of silence.

"We talk. Sometimes we make cookies. And ride Toothless. And... hmm..." Adrianna's brow furrowed a bit. "It's not so much that we \_do\_ things. It's that we're spending time together. Even if we're doing nothing."

"I'm not sure I follow." Astrid admitted. "If you don't do anything, don't you get bored?"

"With daddy? Never!" Adrianna began to skip along as Astrid's pace quickened. "I like doing nothing best of all. Because he always tells the funniest jokes then. And gives the best hugs."

"Don't I give good hugs?" Astrid asked, winking at her little girl.

"Yes. But they're not daddy hugs. And that's okay. I only want daddy hugs from daddy." Adrianna slipped her little hand into her mother's. "You don't have to be daddy. I love you because you're \_mommy\_."

"I know. And trust me, your father and I definitely have our differences." Astrid sighed, her grip on her daughter's hand tightening. "But I want a relationship with you that's just ours. Even if we started a little late."

"Me too." Adrianna squeezed her mother's hand. "Can you teach me more about archery?"

"Sure can. In fact, I know a few things Gobber doesn't." Astrid kicked a sizable rock out of the way so that her daughter wouldn't trip on it.

"Like what?" the girl asked, her eyes brightening with excitement.

"Like I'll teach you at our next reading lesson." Astrid chuckled. She never thought she'd look forward to one but she couldn't wait to teach her daughter how to read and how to shoot arrows at the same time. She made a mental note to thank Gobber when she next saw him. Profusely. "But first I have to get you your very own bow and arrows. Can't go using someone else's, can you?"

"My own?" Adrianna gasped delightedly. "But... but I only did one lesson."

"Exactly. In the other lessons, you're going to need your own equipment." Astrid smiled at her daughter. "I never would have guessed that archery was your thing. Axes and clubs certainly weren't."

Adrianna shuddered at the memory. She still had a little scar from the axe's blade. Hiccup had been very upset with Astrid at the time but he had soon forgotten his anger so he could help the healer bandage her hand. He had told her a funny story while he did so and she quickly forgot about the pain.

Soon, the duo arrived at a creek. Its water was pretty deep but large rocks and thick branches created a makeshift bridge from one end to the other. Astrid let go of Adrianna's hand and easily hopped across. She turned around, expecting to see her daughter on the shore behind her, and found herself staring across the creek at the girl, who hadn't moved.

"What are you waiting for?" she called, beckoning for the girl to continue. "It's easy!"

"Umm... I want to go back." Adrianna said timidly, taking a few steps backward.

"Nonsense!" Astrid hopped back to her daughter. "It's so easy, I could do it with my eyes shut!"

"No, I still think we should turn back." Adrianna backed away some more until she ran into Stormfly standing behind her.

"Come on, Adri." Astrid reached forward and took the girl's hands in hers. "Let me help you."

She walked backwards until her foot found the first rock. She slowly stepped back onto the second, allowing her daughter to step onto the first.

"That's it. See? You're fine." Astrid stepped backward onto the fallen log. She gently tugged on Adrianna's hands and waited for her daughter to put a shaky foot on top of the next rock. "You're doing great! Now step onto this log." she inched backwards to give the girl room. "There you go!"

Adrianna smiled. She had never much liked hiking (she preferred walking on level terrain) but it was a lot more fun with her mother guiding her. Fun in a different sort of way. She had to admit that her father would have let her turn back. Well, she supposed he might have carried her across the creek or found some way to walk around it if she was uncomfortable. But her mother was focused on eradicating her timidity. And she did it in such a way that she didn't necessarily act like her fears were unfounded. Adrianna liked that. It wasn't the "suck up and deal with it" mindset she was so used to seeing, it was a new kind of solution. A new perspective. A fresh perspective.

Astrid gently led her daughter, oblivious to the epiphanies the girl was experiencing. "Okay take a step onto that rock there and then you can-"

"Mommy, don't put your foot there!"

"What?"

Adrianna's warning came a split second too late. Astrid's foot found a loose branch that immediately cracked under her weight. The mother toppled sideways, pulling the daughter down with her into the chilly water. The Haddocks shrieked with surprised before being immersed, both bobbing over the current. It wasn't strong enough to carry them away and both of them were quite capable of swimming.

"I thought you said this would be easy!" Adrianna exclaimed with a grin as the initial shock wore off.

"It is! I just couldn't see where I was going!" Astrid retorted with a chuckle.

"But you said you could get across with your eyes closed!" Adrianna giggled.

"You know what? Hush!" Astrid rolled her eyes but smiled as her daughter continued to laugh at her.

"You said it, not me!" the girl paddled toward her mother. "Well I wasn't expecting to go swimming but it's fun! Next time, could you tell me if you're going to throw us both in the water? I would rather wear my swimsuit."

"You'd just love that, wouldn't you?" Astrid splashed her daughter, who threw her hands over her face. "But it ruins the suspense. What if I meant to do this?"

"I know you didn't. You looked too surprised when you fell." Adrianna smirked, splashing her mother back. "It's okay, mommy. You're just clumsy like me and daddy!"

"I'll have you know I am very graceful!" Astrid shouted, sending another wave of water her daughter's way.

"Well you fell off, not me." Adrianna shrugged, acting as if the cold water in her face didn't bother her at all.

Astrid began to swim back to land, the chilly water finally beginning

to make her skin feel a bit numb. Adrianna quickly followed. The warm summer weather apparently wasn't enough to stop the creek from being cold.

For a few minutes, Astrid and Adrianna lay back against the wet sand and mud and simply looked up at the sky. Astrid took a deep breath, feeling her muscles relax. So this was doing nothing, was it? It was... actually it was quite pleasant. Closeness to someone she loved didn't mean filling their time with activities and lessons... sometimes it just meant quiet reflection.

She looked over at her little girl, whose eyes were fixed on an oddly shaped cloud. Adrianna had her nose. She hadn't noticed before because she'd only seen the child in a foul temper in recent months. She would look at the girl and see her husband's face looking back at her, albeit with longer eyelashes and fuller lips. But the curve of her nose was different. As the mother continued to look, she started to see a bit more of herself in her daughter. Her eyebrows, for example. And the shape of her face. And, of course, the blonde hair was definitely inherited from her.

But that expression on the girl's face, the wistful, contemplative one... that was Hiccup. She'd seen that look on him more times than she could count. She continued to look at her daughter, took in the green of her eyes, the shape of her mouth, the distribution of each facial feature in relation to the others... she was Hiccup's. And she was Astrid's. There was no separating them. She couldn't take what was hers. This girl had bonded her and Hiccup forever. As long as she and Finn lived.

So was the divorce such a good idea? Ripping apart the family, the very people who had made two beautiful children now forcing them to take sides?

She shut her eyes, firmly picturing Hiccup's face. The angry looks he had given her. The dead eyes. And then she thought of her daughter, whose eyes were still bright, still full of wonder. Her eyes were Hiccup's... but they weren't that sick, twisted version of Hiccup's. Her Hiccup, their Hiccup, was gone. And she had to get away from him, protect her children from him. She desperately wanted to see those bright, happy green eyes and be reminded of a man who had once shared them. Not one who perverted them through anger and malice.

After nearly half an hour of complete silence, mother and daughter washed themselves off in the creek so that they wouldn't track mud in the house. Stormfly cooed sleepily. While Astrid and Adrianna had been enjoying their quiet time, she had taken a nap.

"What do you say we dry off the quickest way I know how?" Astrid asked, shoving her feelings back down.

"How?"

Astrid walked over and mounted her dragon. Adrianna's bright green eyes widened. With a pang, Astrid was forcibly reminded of all the times she had seen those eyes so full of life, and not just from her daughter... but she pushed it down. She reached down and helped the girl get on the dragon in front of her. She then put her arms on either side of her daughter and gave the command to fly.



Stormfly was very pleased to take her girls high into the sky. The delighted giggle from the smaller blonde made her feel warm inside. Truth be told, she preferred the boy, but she simply loved the girl's laugh. She could feel the young's weight shift slightly as she looked off to the sides and took in all the beauty around her. Berk was a mere speck on the ground. It put all their problems into perspective, that was for sure.

The Nadder suddenly had a little spark of inspiration. She gently glided the mother and daughter onto a cliff overlooking the ocean. She felt Astrid tense but paid her no heed. When she touched down on the grass, Astrid slid off, looking slightly pale. She helped her daughter dismount as well.

"Wow!" Adrianna squealed. "This place is \_beautiful\_!"

"Yes." Astrid breathed. "Yes, it is."

"You can see the whole ocean from there! Right to the edge of the world!" Adrianna turned around to look at the lush forest behind her. "Everything is beautiful! Why haven't you taken me here before?"

"Because it used to be... well... it's just..." Astrid sighed. "I really don't know."

Adrianna suddenly gasped and bolted toward a large tree. "There's writing on this tree!" she said cheerfully, tracing the carved letters with her pointer finger. "It's your name! And daddy's name!" she turned back to face her mother, her eyes nearly glowing with excitement. "Did \_you\_ carve these? You and daddy?"

Astrid's breath caught in her throat. It had been so long ago that they had carved their names into the tree during the sudden storm. Her breathing became shaky.

"What's the matter?" Adrianna asked, turning to her mother and looking at her with concern. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. I'm just... it's nothing." Astrid blinked a few times and averted her eyes.

Adrianna's brow furrowed and her lips pursed. "It's \_not\_ nothing." she said firmly. "It's \_never\_ nothing. You just won't tell me."

Astrid opened her mouth but no sound came out. Should she tell her daughter the truth? It seemed like such a big burden to put on a girl so young. Then again, it wasn't the first heavy burden her child had carried. If she wasn't so resilient, Astrid may not have told her at all. But what sort of relationship would she have with her daughter if she wasn't honest?

"Adri... sit down, okay?" Astrid lowered herself onto a log and beckoned her daughter closer. The girl sat down next to her. "Do you know what a divorce is?" Adrianna shook her head. "Well... sometimes when two people get married, they're happy for a long time but then things change. People change. You know that. And sometimes they're not able to stay married anymore because they change too much."

"Is someone getting a divorce?" Adrianna gasped, her hands flying to her mouth in horror.

"Listen to me, Adri. I love you. Your daddy loves you. But things have happened and we've been having problems. Problems we just can't solve." Astrid squeezed the girl's shoulder, her voice beginning to shake. "So your daddy and I think it's best to get a divorce so that we can continue to be good parents to you without fighting with each other." Adrianna stared up at her in horror, her eyes wide, her hands clutching her face. "Adri... are you okay?"

"You can't." she whimpered. "You love each other."

"We want to do what's best for you and Finn." Astrid tried to tighten her hold on her daughter's shoulder but Adrianna bolted upright, standing up and looking her mother in the eye. "Adri-"

"You and daddy love each other or you wouldn't have had me and Finn!" the girl shouted, her voice echoing in the woods. "You can't stop being married! Being married is forever!"

"It's not that simple. Your daddy doesn't want to be married to me anymore. And I can't make him-"

"YES YOU CAN!" Adrianna screamed. "You can't give up! You always say never give up! Why are you giving up on daddy?"

"It's not that simple-"

"Yes it is! You don't want to keep trying so you're giving up!" Adrianna stamped her foot on the ground, her lip quivering but her eyes surprisingly dry. "I don't want you and daddy to get divorced! I'm your daughter, why can't I decide?"

"Adri, this is a decision your daddy and I think is best-"

"But I love you and daddy! And why can't me loving you both be enough to make you love each other? Why did you have babies if you were just gonna split them up?" the girl's voice shook with emotion and her face slowly turned red. "If you break up with daddy, you're gonna break up with Finn and me too! If we don't make you happy, are you gonna stop loving us?"

"No, we would never-"

"But you said you'd never stop loving daddy! You lied to me! You lied about everything and I'd rather hate you now instead of waiting for you to hate me first!" Adrianna stormed off, her fists balled at her sides, her body tense, and her jaw clenched.

"Adri, wait-"

"LEAVE ME ALONE! I HATE YOU! I NEVER WANNA TALK TO YOU AGAIN!" the Haddock girl screamed before disappearing into the foliage.

Astrid stood at the edge of the woods, heart pounding in her ears and a burning sensation spreading over the back of her eyeballs. Stormfly trotted over and gently nudged her shoulder. She instinctively reached up and patted her dragon's snout.

"I just thought she was going to cry." she said in a shaky voice. "I didn't think... she always cries..." Stormfly cooed and nudged her with her snout again. "I'm not going after her. She hates me, remember?"

Suddenly, Astrid felt talons on her shoulder. She looked up and found herself face to face with a Terrible Terror. The little dragon squawked and stuck out her foot.

"Pipsqueak?" Astrid raised an eyebrow. "Why did you come to me?"

The dragon huffed a bit, apparently growing tired of holding out her foot. Astrid untied the note and unfolded it so she could read it.

\_Finn has been sold as a slave. We've managed to track him to a Roman territory called Maero. I think the odds of rescuing have risen exponentially so I'm not worried about his safe return.\_

\_However, Hiccup's recent behavior has been a bigger concern. I now have reason to believe that he intends to kill himself rather than accompany Finn and me home. It seems nothing I say can get through to him. He believes himself to be too far gone to be helped.\_

\_Whoever receives this note, please pray for Hiccup's sanity to return. I've never seen a more broken man. He's completely miserable. And he seems to believe his family would be better off without him. I've done everything I can to convince him but it'll take a miracle for anything to sink in.\_

\_Again, please pray.\_

\_Fishlegs\_

Astrid's heart stopped. She could almost feel her organs shutting down. Hiccup... \_suicidal\_? She knew he was angry, she knew he was miserable but this... \_this\_ was never a possibility.

What the Hel had she done? Pushing away her husband to the point of making him believe he was worthless... pushing away her daughter with empty promises... pushing away her son with her anger... this had achieved \_nothing\_.

She hated herself. She had forced her husband to deal with a painful reality all by himself. She had accused him of cheating when he \_did\_ deal with it! She had condemned everything he did, had insulted him, had mocked him, had convinced him that he wasn't a fit parent... of course he wanted to kill himself. Anyone in his position would.

But not on \_her\_ watch.

She turned the parchment over and scribbled out her own note. She then carefully tied it to Pipsqueak's leg.

"Get this message to Hiccup as soon as you can. Please. It's so important." she got out some dragon nip from her satchel and fed it to the Terror. "Please make sure he reads it. \_Please\_."

The Terror warbled in understanding before taking off into the sky.

Astrid watched her fly until she disappeared into the horizon.

\* \* \*

><p>The sun was setting as Hiccup and Fishlegs finally found the home of the man who had bought Berk's heir. Fishlegs could see his friend stiffen the closer they got. He looked over at Toothless, who seemed concerned about his rider's rigid form. He cooed quietly but Hiccup paid him no heed. Meatlug focused on the ground as she walked, reluctant to witness yet another altercation. She had a feeling that this one would be worse than any of the others. Hiccup was giving her a *very* strong negative vibe and she didn't like it one bit.

As they approached the house, a man walked out, leaning against a cane as he limped over to a outdoor chair. He had a rather beautiful garden. Hiccup tensed as he realized just how that garden was kept beautiful. Slave labor. He wanted to vomit.

"You!" he bellowed running up to the vile man with his fists balled so tightly his fingernails cut into his palms. "You bought my son!"

"I bought no one's son." the man said in an unnervingly calm voice. "You are mistaken. Get off my land."

"I am not leaving until I have my son!" Hiccup snarled, approaching the man with alarming speed. "Several people saw you buy a little Norse boy with red hair! Funnily enough, I have a little boy with red hair. And no one takes him away from me!"

"I pay good money for him! He is my property!" the man stood up. "If you even think about taking him, I will have you thrown into prison for theft!"

"Hiccup, he can do that." Fishlegs said, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder.

Hiccup grabbed the front of the man's shirt, yanking him toward his face. "Now you listen to me, you son of a bitch," Fishlegs blanched; he had never heard Hiccup use words like that, "if you do not relinquish my son, I will kill you. You see that dragon over there? He's a Night Fury. And he never misses!"

The man eyed the dragon, his eyes widening slightly. He then turned his head to face his assailant. "Fine! I make a deal with you. But only if you put me down!"

Hiccup obliged, dropping the man rather roughly to the ground. It took a considerable amount of effort for the man pick up his cane but no one even thought about helping him. He then turned back to Hiccup.

"You come back tomorrow." he said, brushing himself off.

"Absolutely not."

"You come back tomorrow or I won't sell! That is my offer, you may take it or leave it!" the man snapped, sounding almost indignant.

"Hiccup, we should just listen to him." Fishlegs said, approaching his friend the way he'd approach an irate Monstrous Nightmare. "We've got our supplies, we can set up camp for the night."

Hiccup was trembling with rage but even he could see the logic in Fishlegs' words.

"We will be back at dawn." he hissed before turning on his heel and walking into the lush forest near the house.

Fishlegs hurried to keep up. Hiccup didn't break his pace until the house was out of sight. It seemed he didn't even want to think about the vile place his son was living. And if the man could see them, he might rescind his offer.

"One more night without my son." he muttered angrily as he set up the tent. "One more stupid night."

"Only one, Hiccup. And then he'll be free." Fishlegs put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Yeah. Whatever." Hiccup finished setting up the tent. He grabbed his blankets from the carrying cases tied to his dragon.

"You're going to bed?"

"What else is there to do? Stay up and talk? I just want to get this over with!" Hiccup growled, placing the blankets on the bottom of the tent before placing his head on his pillow.

"You just want this problem to go away so you can send Finn home and then deal with your pain." Fishlegs crawled into the tent and sat on his knees next to his friend. "But I'm not leaving you here. And neither is Finn."

"I am not going to have this conversation with you again." Hiccup turned around and placed his blanket over his head.

"This is for your own good-"

"Just drop it! There's nothing you or anyone can do for me! Let it go, Fishlegs!" Hiccup placed his hand over his exposed ear and tried to sleep. If he was going to be up at dawn, he was going to have to be asleep earlier than usual.

Fishlegs stared at the Hiccup sized lump under the blankets before sighing and unfolding his own. As he crawled into them, he looked skyward.

"Please..." he prayed, his heart aching. "Please help him."

The silence of the forest was rather oppressive. Not knowing whether or not his prayer would be answered, he burrowed into his blankets and fell asleep within minutes.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Agonizing pain ripped through his chest as he lay there, Dagur the Deranged triumphantly leering down at him. A burst of

strength Hiccup didn't know he had coursed through him and he sat up.<em>

\_\_Dagur stared at him in shock. "What-"\_\_

\_\_Hiccup opened his mouth to speak but no sound emerged. He couldn't take a life. Not Dagur's, not anyone's. He would never be able to live with himself.\_\_

\_"\_\_Dagur, listen to me." he breathed, the pain almost too intense for him to handle. "You don't have to do this. We don't have to kill anyone. Please, we can work something out."\_\_

\_\_Dagur grinned with glee. "I don't think so." he said, baring his teeth as he slipped another dagger from its sheath and, before Hiccup could react, plunged it into his stomach.\_\_

\_\_Blood began to pour out of Hiccup's mouth. His body jolted several times. He was choking, his vision was blurring... \_\_and then he was floating. Looking down on the body, which rested on his dragon's back. \_His\_ body. \_His\_ corpse.

He was dead. Dagur had won.

\* \* \*

><p><em><em>Here we go! I cannot begin to tell you how excited I am about the next chapter! I actually came up with the idea for it the day before I finished <em>\_\_Under Pressure\_\_ and I've been dying to share it! You have no idea! I actually started writing it on March 20\_\_\_\_th\_\_\_\_! That's how long I've been holding onto this!\_\_

\_\_But this chapter is pretty full too so don't forget to review! I wrote it entirely myself but I would like to thank

\_\_\_\_\*\*httydfan1991\*\*\_\_\_\_ for being my temporary beta and

\_\_\_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_\_\_ for some ideas I used.\_\_

\_\_Also, random, but I've been creative consultant for a fic

\_\_\_\_\*\*Miss Pookamonga\*\*\_\_\_\_ has been working on and it's been an incredibly fun experience. I don't know when she's going to post it but if you're fans of the Avengers (Loki in particular), Frozen, and Rise of the Guardians (in addition to How to Train Your Dragon, of course), you're sure to love it! So please keep an eye out for it!\_\_

\_\_Don't forget to review!\_\_

\_\_~KateMarie999\_\_

## 14. If

\_\_I don't think I can properly introduce this chapter. You just kind of have to read it. I will say that there is language and a little bit of gore. Also some disturbing stuff. I definitely kept it in T-rated confines but it's still pretty darn risky.\_\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Fourteen: If<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>It was surreal to follow his dragon back to land, his blood pouring out of a body that no longer contained him. Hiccup's heart, or whatever he had now, raced uncontrollably. His senses were still in perfect working order. He could hear every sound, see every detail clearer than he ever had before. His essence traveled without his consent, not even allowing him to close his eyes long enough to blink, as he descended upon a cliff face on Brawn.<p>

"HICCUP!"

The voice tore through his ears like he had been stabbed yet again. Astrid rushed forward, knocking people out of the way as the body fell to the ground.

"Astrid!" he called. "I'm here! Astrid!"

His wife fell to her knees beside his body, oblivious to his frantic voice. She gently lifted the head, allowing the blood from his slack mouth to trickle onto her skirt as she placed it on her lap. Her shaking fingers began to stroke his thick brown hair.

"Hiccup?" she whimpered. "P-please talk to me."

"He's dead, you fool!" Dagur cackled, sliding expertly off of the Night Fury, who had begun to roar. "Just like you knew he would be!"

Tears poured out of Astrid's eyes as she cradled her husband's limp head in her lap. "No... no... no..." she wept.

"Astrid!" Hiccup cried as loudly as he could, his voice straining. "ASTRID!"

"That's enough blubbering." Dagur grabbed her upper arm and yanked her up, causing Hiccup's head to collide with the ground at their feet with a solid thud. "You are mine now."

Astrid spat in his face. Dagur lifted a hand and struck her with a reverberating slap. The Hooligans roared with anger and suddenly all Hel broke loose.

Swords clashed, blood splattered, Berserkers and Hooligans alike fell to the ground in death. Hiccup screamed in horror as he watched a Berserker solider plunge a sword into Snotlout's stomach. His friend gasped in shock. He stood, then wavered and fell to knees, blood pouring from his fatal wounds.

Toothless roared angrily, trying to take out as many Berserkers as he could, but Dagur ducked below him.

"TOOTHLESS!" Hiccup warned frantically.

But his dragon couldn't hear him. Hiccup watched helplessly as Dagur thrust his sword into the Night Fury's neck. His best friend cried out in immense pain, his vibrant green eyes wide and fading. He staggered for a moment before he fell limply to the ground. Blood seeped underneath the body.

"NOOOO!" Hiccup wailed, tears pouring out of his invisible eyes.  
"TOOTHLESS!"

Dagur let out a delighted cackle as he leered over his prize before turning to watch the battle before him. Hiccup followed his gaze just in time to witness Fishlegs fall to a Berserker. A familiar battle cry diverted his attention. Gobber was surrounded by three burly Berserker soldiers and was killed within seconds.

Hiccup turned to watch Ruffnut be slashed open from the shoulder to the waist, gutted like a hunted animal. Tuffnut died with a yell. Hiccup watched his childhood friend's head roll away from his body. The deceased chief scanned the battlefield and watched Hooligan after Hooligan brutally slaughtered. Soon the cliff was awash with the blood of Hiccup's people.

At the end of the battle, the entire Hooligan council, minus Astrid, was slain, and only three Berserker soldiers were left. Meatheads who fought alongside Berk were struck down as well. Sigrid, the two week old baby born to Kara and Frederik, became the youngest chief Brawn had ever seen.

"Well," Dagur said cheerfully, "Now that \_that's\_ over with," in a sudden, harsh movement, he grabbed Astrid around the waist, "come, my bride, we have to make a quick stop to pick up your offspring before we sail back to Berserker Island."

"I won't go anywhere with you!" Astrid shrieked, pushing herself out of Dagur's grip. Her voice trembled and tears soaked her face.

"Oh you will!" Dagur grabbed the front of her shirt and lifted her so that she looked him straight in the eye. "Or the kids die. Got it?"

Astrid remained silent, her jaw clenched. Dagur brought her closer to his face.

"\_Got it\_?"

She nodded, squeezing her eyes shut so she didn't have to look at him anymore. Hiccup tried to run to her but found himself weighted to the spot. He watched helplessly as Dagur let out one last guffaw before waving her away. She was carried by two of the remaining Berserkers, still struggling and screaming, away from the body. Hiccup could still hear her cries even when she was out of sight. Dagur watched with satisfaction before turning around to face Toothless.

"Ahh, mine at last." he simpered. "What shall I take first? How about the head?"

He grabbed an axe and raised it over the Night Fury's head...

And then the cliff dissolved.

Hiccup was now standing in an unfamiliar house. Above the mantle was a large skull, its features immediately recognizable. Instinctively, he strode forward, finding himself mobile again, and inspected it.



"Toothless?" he whimpered.

The door behind them burst open. Dagur lead Astrid by the hair as he stomped into the house. He threw her to the ground. Her face and exposed arms were bruised. She gazed at him with such malice, hatred the likes of which Hiccup had never seen before.

"Think you can just bump me off?" Dagur kicked her in the stomach.

Hiccup lunged to punch him but was horrified when his hand went directly through Dagur's skull. He growled in rage. Both Dagur and Astrid still couldn't see him.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Astrid hissed through her teeth.

Dagur turned to a Berserker guard looming in the doorway. "Bring me the girl." he demanded before turning his hate filled gaze to his wife. Hiccup nearly vomited in his mouth at the thought. "If you didn't do anything to my food, you shouldn't have any problem with your precious little girl sampling it first."

Astrid's eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. Hiccup's heart stopped. His body began to tremble as a feeling of dread swept through him.

"Addie?" he whimpered, more tears falling from his eyes.

Moments later, his daughter was dragged in by a rough looking Berserker soldier. Her arm was clasped around a bloody rag doll that Hiccup almost didn't recognize. The little girl was dressed in rags that barely covered her and did nothing to keep her warm. Every inch of her dirty body was covered in cuts and bruises. She was missing several teeth. Adrianna looked up at Dagur, her green eyes wide with terror.

Hiccup couldn't move. It was like weights had been attached to his feet, drawing him down and refusing to let up even for a second. He wanted to rip Dagur limb from limb. The most important people in his life, people he would die for in an instant, were suffering a fate worse than death. He didn't know where they had found his little girl but Dagur's horrific statement from mere days before rang in his ears. She looked like she had become the very thing she clutched in her arms.

Berserker soldiers suddenly lunged forward and grabbed Astrid's arms. She struggled against them as Dagur grabbed her little girl by the hair and forced her over to the table. He stuck her face in the hot soup and Hiccup heard a squeak from her throat as she tried to pull her head out before she drowned.

"Okay! I poisoned it!" Astrid screamed, struggling against the men holding her back. "I won't do it again, just let my daughter go!"

Hiccup's voice died in his throat or he would have been screaming with her. He couldn't move or speak or close his eyes. He had to helplessly watch from the sidelines.

"Oh Astrid, don't you know? You need to be punished!" Dagur simpered, a horrible smile distorting his face. "Come on, little girl, eat up! You look\_ so\_ hungry."

Adrianna shook her head, still too frightened to speak but retaining the stubbornness she had inherited from both her parents. Dagur lifted the girl's head from the bowl and was dismayed to see that she had kept her mouth squeezed shut. Hiccup's heart leaped for a moment. His little girl was strong. She had a chance, however remote.

Dagur threw her face in the soup again. "I SAID EAT IT!" he shouted over Astrid's cries.

He finally pulled Adrianna out of the soup again. Her mouth was full of the concoction. Hiccup's heart was pounding in his ears. If she swallowed, she would be dead in seconds.

"Fight him." he pleaded, his breathing labored as he felt his lungs shrink. "You can do this, baby."

Adrianna spat the soup out on the ground. Vegetables and broth hit it with a splatter.

Hiccup saw Astrid's look of triumph. He felt the pride of revenge swell in his chest. "That's my girl!"

Dagur growled and suddenly grasped Adrianna's head and twisted. Astrid's eyes widened.

SNAP!

The little body slumped to the ground, limp as the doll that tumbled from her arms. For a moment, all was silent except the echoes of the sickening snap reverberating in Hiccup's ears.

Within seconds, the spell was broken. Hiccup's mouth opened in a silent scream as his feet suddenly gained mobility. He rushed forward and fell to his knees in front of his little girl. Her beautiful green eyes were blank and unfocused. Her head was at a bizarre angle, her features oddly grotesque.

"NO!"

The scream pierced Hiccup's heart like a dagger. Astrid had been released and she immediately fell to her knees in the place Hiccup was sitting. She picked up the body and shook it.

"Anna... Addie... baby, please speak to me." she wept, cradling her little girl in her arms and rocking back and forth.

Hiccup's voice returned. Though his sobbing should have blurred his surroundings, his vision was perfectly clear as he wailed at the sight of his baby girl's still and unmoving face. The lips that would never break into a smile. The eyes that would never again widen when she was curious. The nose that would never again crinkle ever so much when she was feeling bashful. The throat that would never again emit another giggle, another hiccup... everything he had done to protect this little girl had been for \_nothing\_. He could feel his heart being ripped to shreds. The agony was unbearable. He wanted so badly to close his eyes, to sob and be heard, to hold his baby one more

time... yet he could do nothing but stare at her pale face, watch Astrid rock her back and forth, tears falling onto Adrianna's face that the girl could never wipe away.

"Addie..." he sobbed, his throat hoarse. "My Addie..."

Dagur leaned down in front of Astrid, casting a shadow across the little body. "Now you know what will happen if you dare to defy me. Next time, it's your son." he hissed.

Astrid's head jerked up. "No! You said he would be the heir!"

Dagur began to cackle, shaking his head as if Astrid had told him a very funny joke. "Oh Astrid," he said, his voice infuriatingly condescending, "do you really think I need your son as my heir?"

Astrid's eyes widened. "What?"

Dagur smirked and straightened up, turning back to his guards. As he walked away, Hiccup's mind began to race. He wanted to decipher the meaning in Dagur's words but Adrianna's lifeless form kept flashing in his brain, completely interrupting his thoughts.

Without warning, his little girl's body disappeared and the room dissolved into an unfamiliar terrain. Hiccup's feet were weighted to the ground as he watched a large crowd of people in what appeared to be a celebration. It was hard to make out but it looked like a little boy was being tossed around from one person to another. A woman was being restrained from stepping in to rescue him. The laughter echoed through the trees and into the field.

Suddenly, there was a tussle. The boy had done something. He had gotten free.

"RUN!" shouted a woman's voice. Astrid's voice. So the little boy could only be...

Finn was running as fast as he could toward Hiccup. His father was invisible and rooted to the spot as the boy ran closer and closer. Hiccup got down on his knees to catch him. He was getting nearer, escaping his captors, running with just enough of a head start...

But even Finn, as fast as he was for his age, could not outrun a dozen arrows, hatchets and daggers. Hiccup heard the weapons whizzing past him, praying that none would strike his son. But the odds were stacked against him. A single hatchet seemed to soar in slow motion closer and closer to the boy's back.

"FINN!" Hiccup cried.

The force of the blade knocked the boy forward. He spat blood and tumbled through Hiccup. Blood poured all over the ground. Finn's eyes were wide with horror, his whole body trembling and choking noises coming from his throat.

Mobility returned to Hiccup's feet and he fell forward next to his son. "Finn, buddy, come on..." he mumbled through fresh tears. "You can do this, little man. Stay with me."

The grass was painted red from the boy's back and mouth. The wide blue eyes blinked over and over, tears falling to the ground and mixing with his blood. The thick, crimson liquid filled his lungs, cascaded down his back. The little body shook for a few seconds more and then went completely still.

Hiccup wanted to scream again. He wanted to fall to the ground, to tear out his hair, to release the howls of anguish bursting within him. But he couldn't stop staring into the lifeless face of his son. The eyes that had nearly glowed with excitement on Snoggletog morning or when he got to go on a flight with his Poppy were unfocused and still wide with terror. The freckly face that broke into wide smiles was frozen in the expression of agonized pain and abject fear. The body that ran around Berk with a zest for life would never move again.

Astrid was running across the field. Hiccup wanted to push her away, to prevent her from seeing her little boy dead on the ground. But he was powerless.

The moment her son's body came into focus, she was silent. Almost like she was in a trance, she walked up to it and got on her knees next to his head. Tears were raining down her face but it was like she had no energy left to scream. Like the torture of losing her husband and daughter had numbed her completely. She reached out a trembling hand and stroked Finn's hair, her sobs almost inaudible.

Hiccup wanted to hold her. He wanted to let her punch him until her energy was spent, until she could do nothing but collapse into his arms and cry her heart out. He wanted to cry with her. To go through this together. The look on her face was the most horrible thing Hiccup had ever seen, worse than the dead faces of his children. Astrid had lost the will to live. She was the living embodiment of the death that had just occurred. There was no hope in her eyes, not a single spark of life. She drew breath, her heart still beat, but she was not alive. She had died the second she lost the last member of her family.

There seemed to be no transition at all this time. Hiccup was thrown into yet another unfamiliar room. It was night time, probably just before dawn. Dagur was lying on a double bed but Astrid was not lying next to him. There was a rope attached to the bedpost that appeared to have been used to tie Astrid down so that she could not escape. Except that she had. Hiccup's eyes frantically scanned the room and finally found her at the doorway, staring at Dagur with dead eyes. There was a knife in her hand, one designed for cutting meat.

Suddenly, Hiccup knew what was about to happen. His eyes widened. "Astrid..." he whispered, stepping forward. "You don't have to do this."

Astrid's eyes remained focused on Dagur's sleeping form. She breathed through her teeth, making strange hissing noises with both inhales and exhales. She took a step forward.

"Astrid!" Hiccup said in a much louder voice. "Think about what you're doing!"

His words had absolutely no impact on his young wife. Her hands shook but her expression was determined. She soon reached the bed and raised the knife.

"Astrid!"

The woman slammed the blade into Dagur's chest. Dagur awoke with a scream as his blood poured from his wound and then from his mouth.

"YOU KILLED THEM!" Astrid screamed, raising the knife and plunging it into his stomach. "YOU KILLED MY FAMILY, YOU SICK SON OF A BITCH!"

Dagur tried to say something but his blood choked him. His eyes were wide with horror.

"HOW DOES IT FEEL?" Astrid howled. "HOW DOES IT FEEL TO LOSE EVERYTHING?"

She viciously slammed the blade into his belly. Blood gushed from the body, which was now completely still. But Astrid wasn't finished. She held the knife in both her hands and stabbed him over and over, her fingers now coated in his blood and slipping up and down the hilt. She let out an enraged scream the likes of which Hiccup had never heard come from anyone. He didn't know a human being could make a sound so haunting.

At long last, Dagur's body was unrecognizable and Astrid was covered from head to toe in his blood. She let the knife slip from her fingers and drop with a clatter to the ground. Then she turned toward the door and walked, as if in a trance, out of it and down the stairs. Hiccup followed her as she emerged from the house, walking into the slowly rising sun. The blood seemed to shine in its light. They walked for a minute, finally reaching a cliff. Hiccup's heart clenched as Astrid walked to the edge and looked down.

"Astrid..." he whined, reaching out his arms. "Astrid... NO!"

She couldn't hear him. A look of complete serenity crossed over her face, still smudged with blood.

"I'm sorry." she breathed, looking into the sky. "But there's nothing left."

"Astrid!" Hiccup sobbed, his vision clear but his eyes streaming tears that he could feel dripping off his face.

A tiny smile brightened Astrid's features. "You always did like free falling." she said, winking to the sky.

"ASTRID!"

Hiccup's feet were once again weighted to the ground as he watched his wife fall forward and disappear off the edge. He let out a scream so loud and long, he knew his voice would be destroyed were he alive. His whole family was dead. Everyone he had ever cared about.

All because he hadn't killed one man.

Hiccup fell to his knees by the cliff, sobbing like he had never sobbed before. He didn't care that his voice echoed in his ears. He didn't care that his tears completely soaked the front of whatever garment he was wearing. He didn't care that he was pulling out fistfuls of his hair.

"I'm sorry!" he wailed, looking up at the sky. "I take it back! I'll kill him! DO YOU HEAR ME? I'LL KILL HIM!"

Aside from his voice, there was absolute silence. It was as if all the noise, the waves of the ocean below, the trees blowing in the wind, the birds singing, everything was muted completely. As if Hiccup had gone deaf to everything except for his own voice.

He could finally shut his eyes, only to open them a moment later. Adrianna's dead, blank eyes stared at him. Finn's blood splattered over his vision. He could see them. They surrounded him, followed him. He couldn't escape for even a second.

"I'll make it right." he wept. "Please... please give me another chance."

A hand suddenly gripped his shoulder. With a scream of terror Hiccup bolted upright and nearly slammed into an unknown force looming over him. His fists swung instinctively before his eyes landed on the terrified green eyes of his Night Fury, who was very much alive, and Fishlegs, who stared at him with a look of shock, terror and distress.

\* \* \*

><p><em><em>I hope that chapter wasn't too intense! It was risky, that's for sure. As much as I enjoyed writing it, I know it was intense so I hope I didn't scar anyone. But like I've said to several people, it was necessary because Hiccup needed something extreme to snap him back<em>\_

\_\_\_\_ Writing assistance and editing credits go to \_\_\_\_\*\*EmmerzK  
 \*\*\_\_\_\_and \_\_\_\_\*\*Fritz96\*\*\_\_\_\_. Discussion credits include\_\_\_\_,  
 \_\_\_\_\*\*amyboomerang\*\*\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\*\*imaginationflies\*\*\_\_\_\_, and  
 \_\_\_\_\*\*httydfan1991\*\*\_\_\_\_, but I spoke to a bunch of people about it  
 so if I missed you, please let me know and I'll add you to the list.  
 \_\_\_\_But the inspiration was given to me by \_\_\_\_\*\*nedandchuck\*\*\_\_\_\_  
 who had a dream about the possible outcome of a Dagur victory and  
 made me really think about what would happen. Her version included  
 Astrid getting Stockholm syndrome and becoming obsessed with Dagur  
 but I thought I'd pick a different angle.\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_I've worked so very hard on this chapter, discussed it for hours with several people, checked the forums just to make sure it wouldn't be M-rated, written and rewritten sections, copied edits someone sent me through text (which is not an easy thing to do), and done a lot more than I can't even remember to make this chapter as good as possible. So I ask only that you let me know what you think and if all that work was worth it!

\_\_~KateMarie999\_\_

## 15. The Cave

\_Here we go! We are in the story's climax and the next few chapters should be fun!\_

\_Also I made a little edit nearly a year after posting it because I suddenly became aware of a mistake we made. Please point out major grammar errors or accidental plot holes if you see them (but don't nitpick).\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Fifteen: The Cave<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>It took several seconds for Hiccup's eyes to adjust to the lamplight in the tent. They were filled to the brim with tears and sweat. His clothes were soaked, his hair plastered to his forehead, his breathing shaky and ragged, his whole body trembling... this was the worst nightmare he had <em>ever<em> had. He put his hands up to his temples and closed his eyes. But the images he had just seen, as clear as if they were happening right at that moment, continued to flash at him until he was certain he would go insane.

"Hiccup, are you okay? Do you need anything?" Fishlegs muttered softly over Hiccup's panting.

Hiccup nodded. "Water." he choked, his throat sore and scratchy from his screaming.

Fishlegs immediately grabbed the closest skin of water he could find and handed it to his friend. Hiccup drank it down within seconds and wiped his mouth, still panting but at least feeling like he could speak properly. Tears continued to pour out of his eyes as he grabbed a nearby cloth and wiped down his forehead. Toothless cooed quietly and nuzzled his human's shoulder. Once most of his sweat had been wiped off his body, Hiccup threw his arms around his dragon.

"Toothless... bud... you're okay..." he whispered, sniffing and gently stroking the Night Fury's neck.

There was a long pause as Hiccup continued to cry quietly into the dragon's scales. Toothless made a comforting sort of croon and snuggled up to the distressed human. For a while, there was complete silence aside from Hiccup's intermittent sniffles. Meatlug stuck her head into the tent, her eyes wide and directed at her pale human. Fishlegs beckoned her over and rubbed her behind the ears. She licked his face, hoping that her little bit of affection would be enough to calm him down. She didn't like it when her human was upset. And she definitely didn't like the screams she had heard a few minutes previously.

Fishlegs stared at his friend as he cuddled up to his dragon. Hiccup clutched the Night Fury's neck as though letting go or loosening his hold would throw him back into his nightmare. His whole body trembled; his eyes were wide and unfocused. The burly Viking had been awakened by Hiccup's cries for Astrid and had desperately tried to wake his chief as he then cried out for his dragon and then his

children. Fishlegs didn't know why Hiccup had pleaded before finally awakening but he was almost too frightened to want to find out.

At long last, Hiccup's cries died down. He finally looked at Fishlegs, still stroking his dragon's neck as he did so but not clutching as hard as before.

"Is that... are they always that bad?" Fishlegs ventured, hoping that Hiccup wouldn't lash out at him or start crying again.

"N-never that b-bad." Hiccup mumbled in a shaking voice.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Fishlegs asked, scooting forward slightly. "It might help if you get it all out. That's what I do when I'm upset..."

Hiccup nodded, adjusting himself so that he was now leaning against his dragon's stomach. Toothless protectively curled his body around his human. It took several seconds before Hiccup found the strength to speak. As he recounted the horrible images he had watched, Fishlegs paled and his hands flew to his mouth. When Hiccup came to the part of the dream when he had watched Toothless die, he stroked his dragon again and a few tears leaked from his eyes. But it was recounting the fate of the children that appeared to be the hardest. It was all he could do not to burst into tears once more as he choked out their individual fates. As he spoke, he silently prayed to all the gods he knew of that his children were still alive. That his daughter was home safe and that his son would be within a day or two. He would do anything, anything at all to save them from the events he had seen. His head began to ache from the strain, both emotional and physical, he had experienced in the last hour.

Fishlegs was completely silent throughout the dream's retelling. He couldn't allow his mind to wander even for a second for fear that his brain would conjure up the most horrible images imaginable. Sweet Adrianna dressed in filthy rags and taken advantage of before being murdered on an impulse; Finn, the fearless boy who had such a zest for life, frozen in the last expression his face ever took: fear and pain. He certainly didn't feel about them the way he felt about his own children but watching the twins grow up and supporting the family during the darkest of times gave him a strong affection for them. He remained silent for a few minutes longer to organize his thoughts and think of something encouraging to say, given the situation.

Hiccup squirmed uncomfortably after a bit before interrupting the silence in an emotionally raspy voice. "Please say something. Before I lose my mind."

Fishlegs took several deep breaths, resting a hand on his dragon, who nuzzled it affectionately. "I... I don't know what to say."

Hiccup rubbed his forehead, trying to relieve the throbbing. He had to think: would he really go back in time and give Dagur a chance to live? Would he rather die instead? Leave his family to... that future? What future? All it was was pain and abuse and mockery... and it wasn't just his family, it was his friends... his eyes suddenly widened. Gobber, Snotlout, Fishlegs, the Thorston twins... they sacrificed themselves, died at the hands of the Berserkers. They left children fatherless and motherless in the attempt to preserve Berk and the Haddock heritage. They had been afraid in their lack of



support but they \_weren't\_ unfaithful or disloyal. In fact, they were as close to loyal as loyalty could come.

Understanding clicked in his mind and a heavy weight suddenly lifted from his shoulders. He felt his eyes focus and his muscles relax; it was worth it. Killing a man was the most horrible, heinous thing he had ever done. But if it meant his village was safe from the bonds of a terrible clan, it was worth it. If it saved his little boy and girl from the world's most disgusting forms of abuse, it was worth it. If it saved Astrid from Dagur's constant torture through physical and emotional abuse, Hel, even protecting her from watching her own children die before her eyes and becoming a murderer herself... without a shadow of a doubt, it was worth it.

Hiccup looked at his prosthetic with an exhausted look of shame. "I'm a fool." Through his peripheral he noticed his friend look up at him. "I've been so bent out of shape these two years for killing a man... when really, if I hadn't, he would have destroyed everything...\_everything\_ near and dear to me." Hiccup huffed and buried his face in his hands. "I disgust myself."

"Well... Hiccup, if it's any consolation, I understand why you felt the way you did." Fishlegs said in a gentle voice. "But you did what you had to do. And we all commend you for that. The question is... what are you going to do now?"

Hiccup paused, contemplating his question. For the first time in ages he felt... calm. Relaxed. Passionate instead of cold. Formidable by not murderous. For the first time in a long time, Hiccup felt like himself. He felt\_ free\_.

But he also felt something else. A new burden had fallen on his shoulders, this one lighter and, he realized, one he had put there himself. He took a deep, shaking breath, the throbbing in his head coming back full force as the weight of what he had done to his family crashed over him.

"There really isn't anything I \_can\_ do." he admitted, placing his fingers on his temple. "I'm... I'm \_divorced\_; I'm probably going to come back to find my job being taken over by someone else. As for the kids, well, they'll be gone too. I have done to my family, in a way, what Dagur would have done. Maybe not so violently, but I ripped the people I love to pieces."

Fishlegs nodded solemnly. "It's true that you've done a lot of damage and you may no longer be allowed to be chief of Berk. But you can still mend those relationships."

"With the kids, maybe. Probably." Hiccup breathed a humorless laugh, a few tears escaping his eyelids once more. "But Astrid? No. Forgiveness is too much to ask."

Fishlegs shook his head. "See, I don't think so." he said with a smile. "I think she's holding out for the man she fell in love with. So it's up to you now. You can let her walk away or you can come barreling after her with an apology and probably a new weapon of some sort. Because that's what you do. Both of you."

Hiccup gave his friend a wistful smile but shook his head so vehemently, his dark hair was tousled. "Thanks for that Fish, but...

I don't think it's possible. She hates me. It would be better if I just tried to see the kids and leave her alone. She might end up killing me with her bare hands."

"You don't know that." Fishlegs insisted. "Astrid loves the man she married. Still loves him. And it's not so hard to become that man again. All you have to do is make sure she knows just how sorry you are."

"All speculation," Hiccup raised a finger. "But you don't know her like I do. Once she's been pushed this far, there's no going back."

"Hiccup, what I'm about to say may be the most important thing I've said since we left Berk." Fishlegs said, his eyes boring into Hiccup's. "I think you're wrong."

Hiccup chortled. "I was expecting something more..."

"Profound?" Fishlegs suggested.

Hiccup shrugged. "Something like that."

Fishlegs was happy to hear his friend's laugh but he scowled. "I'm serious."

Hiccup took a deep breath, the laughter within finally released. "I think I'm going to go outside to get some air."

Berk's chief grabbed a lantern and stepped out of the tent. He appreciated the cool breeze that met him the moment he was outside. He sat down and stared at the sky, waiting for the sun to ascend and bathe the forest in a little bit of light. There was a long stretch of silence. The lantern flickered, illuminating the wood in the tiny bit of light it provided.

Suddenly, there was a squawk. Hiccup looked up and saw an outline of a dragon in the sky before he caught sight of it in the lamplight.

"Pipsqueak?" he asked, genuinely confused. "What are you doing here?"

The Terrible Terror landed on his shoulder and stuck out her foot. Hiccup quickly untied the note and instructed the little dragon to go find Fishlegs for a reward. He unfolded the paper and raised an eyebrow at Fishlegs' untidy scrawl.

"What in the world..." he muttered to himself, turning the paper over.

And then he stopped.

That handwriting was familiar. Uncomfortably familiar. Hiccup was about to call for Fishlegs to take the note... but he stopped. His name was on the top of the paper. He leaned toward the lamplight so that he could read the writing.

\_Hiccup,\_

\_This mess we've gotten ourselves into was my fault. I pushed you away, I didn't listen to you when you needed someone to confide in, to talk to, and I became impatient when you started to distance yourself from me. I can see now that you were in a lot of pain and I ignored it, hoping it would go away. But it didn't. And I made things so much worse for you by forcing you to deal with all of this on your own.\_

\_I know you're probably still angry and never want to see me again. But if there's anything I can say that can get through to you, please come home. I need to speak to you and Adri is doing so well. She needs to see her daddy again. Just... please come home. Please find Finn and bring him home safe. I hope to see you both soon.\_

\_Astrid\_

Astrid's writing became smudged as it captured the tears now raining from her husband's eyes. Hiccup wanted to read the note again but he couldn't see clearly enough to make out the letters. It didn't matter. \_Astrid wanted him back\_. The gods had given him a second chance he hadn't deserved.

He clutched the letter to his chest as the tears flowed. "She wants me... she still wants me." he heard himself murmuring through the tears. He felt like his heart would burst with joy; the love of his life didn't hate him. She wanted to see him.

Fishlegs, hearing the fresh sobs from the outside, bounded out of the tent only to see his friend lovingly tracing the outlines of the letters his wife had written, almost like he was caressing her face.

Hiccup beamed up at him, tears still falling but eyes alight with happiness. "She still wants me..." Hiccup looked back at the paper with a short laugh, smoothing out the lines on the paper. "Why did I ever doubt you?"

"Because you're stubborn. And that's how I \_know\_ our Hiccup is back." Fishlegs chuckled, gently tugging the note from Hiccup's hand. "I told you she was going to forgive you."

Hiccup paused to wipe his face off with the collar of his shirt. "Unless she ends up punching me in the face as soon as I get there. But I won't assume things or doubt her. She seems pretty... honest, here." he took the note back and gently tapped it with his forefinger.

Fishlegs looked up just in time to see a small reddish hue on the horizon. Dawn had come at last. He turned back to Hiccup, whose green eyes shone with optimism and hope, and felt his heart leap with happiness. There was no doubt in his mind that the Hiccup everyone had so sorely missed was back at last.

It was almost a surreal experience to watch his friend and chief stand tall and proud as he once did, before turning towards him with a daring smirk. "Let's go get my son."

Fishlegs felt like embarking on their quest right away but he paused for a moment. "After you change clothes. Can't hug Finn in that

sweaty shirt."

"Hm?" Hiccup looked down at the damp cloth clinging to his chest. "No, I guess not." he let out a laugh. "Thanks, \_mom\_" he added as he crawled into the tent.

Hiccup threw on his last clean shirt, his only one with buttons down the front, and a fresh pair of pants. Sweaty, sticky clothes weren't comfortable and he wasn't about to subject his son to that just because he was too impatient to take a moment to change. He emerged from the tent with a wide grin and packed his things as quickly as he could. Fishlegs helped, relishing the sounds of his friend's laughter.

Once their bags were packed and tied to their dragons, who were in much better spirits now that their humans were happy, they walked toward Ratri's residence. Rather, Fishlegs walked. Hiccup's cheerfulness seemed to envelop him completely so he skipped merrily along, not at all caring about how silly he looked. Toothless delightedly bounded beside him, hopping about and hoping that his human would play with him later. It had been far too long.

His wish was granted seconds later when Hiccup picked up a branch. "Go long!" he shouted, pitching it as far as he could.

Toothless galloped after it and caught it in midair. He then ran back to his human, walking backwards so that Hiccup wouldn't have to break his stride. Hiccup reached for the branch but his dragon growled and moved it out of his reach.

"Oh, so that's how it's going to be!" Hiccup chirped, lunging for the stick. "Give it back, you big lizard!"

Toothless growled again, grinning as his human continued to narrowly miss the edges of the stick. Hiccup suddenly bolted forward and dived at his dragon, grabbing the reptile around the neck. Toothless snorted in amusement and lifted himself so that his human dangled off of him.

"Let me have it!" Hiccup shouted, laughing as he tried to climb up Toothless' neck.

Toothless rumbled his stubborn refusal. Fishlegs was doubling over, laughing at the pair. It was like Hiccup was fifteen again, roughhousing with his dragon in the most undignified way possible. Not that anyone minded, of course.

They arrived at Ratri's residence far too soon. The smiles faded as they arrived. Ratri was nowhere to be seen but an elderly man sat outside the house, smiling kindly as they approached.

The elderly man slowly stood, the marks on his body visible from the Hooligans' vantage point. The men couldn't help the simultaneous rise of anger in their chests at the obvious abuse the old man had endured.

Before either man could speak, the elderly man stepped forward and bowed low. "Hello gentleman, it is good to meet you at last."

Hiccup and Fishlegs shared a look as the man stood straight. They

tensed when he held Hiccup's hand in his and shook it gingerly.

"At last?" Hiccup asked.

"Yes, sir. The Night Fury, the descriptions match; you are strong Finn's father, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third chief of Berk."

Hiccup blinked several times, surprised at this man's observations. "Finn's talked about me?"

"Although he ran from you originally, he missed you more than anyone would realize, even himself." the man smiled warmly, still lightly patting Hiccup's large freckled hand.

"And you are... sorry, what's your name?"

"Where are my manners?" the man tittered lightly. "My name is Benen. I, too, have been working for Ratri."

Hiccup couldn't help but feel the warmth of the slave's personality, a man who probably suffered day in and day out. It was refreshing and again made him feel a tad guilty for being so petty. But he had to move on.

He cast aside his thoughts and urgently asked, "Where is he? And how is he?"

"Your son is a little worse for wear but he'll pull through. You've named him well. He's a fearless lad. So much spirit."

"You should have seen him when he was three." Hiccup said cheerfully; Benen joined in his laughter.

"He has been a light to me in this dark place, these few days. But I could not be more happy that soon, he will be free."

Hiccup smiled at him graciously and patted his shoulder. "And I'm thankful he had such a great man in the same house as him." He hadn't been talking to this man for five minutes but he knew a good heart when he saw one.

"You must be Fishlegs." Benen said, turning to Hiccup's companion. "Finn, understandably, didn't talk about you quite as much but he says you're a loyal friend of the family." he gestured toward a path leading down a small hill. "Ratri instructed me to walk you to the mines."

"Mines?" Hiccup's heart rate quickened as they followed him down the worn path.

"I can't pretend I know what he's up to." Benen said, walking alongside them. "But I can tell you that he's a shrewd businessman. And he wouldn't irreparably harm what he considers to be property. Your son will be fine."

Hiccup sighed in relief, but paused when a thought struck him. "But I'm-we're-basically a threat to that. So i can't imagine this exchange will be a walk to the sweets shop."

"No." said Benen. "But if Finn's description of you is any indicator, you're not going to give up so easily. He saw that firsthand."

"If you've learned anything of Finn I am sure you've noticed he has a strong streak of stubbornness?" Benen nodded vehemently with a laugh. "Well it's been debated who has the most stubbornness: me or his mother."

Fishlegs instantly piped up, "Mother."

"Oh, I'm sure." Benen chuckled. "She's a woman. Keep an eye on your daughter; she's likely to be the same way." he paused for a moment. "Of course, I mean no disrespect."

"Nah." Hiccup waved a hand, the smile still firmly on his face. "I agree with you."

"Sir, if I may-"

"Yes, you may call me Hiccup."

Benen paused for a moment before a willing smile appeared. "Very well... Hiccup. But if I may, you seem much happier than young Finn described. Was this due to some bitterness on his part or has something changed?"

"That's a bit of a complicated story." Hiccup said with a sigh. "But, to keep it brief, yes, something has most certainly changed. Finn had every right to be bitter. And I'm determined to make it up to him."

"Well here's your chance." Benen gestured toward the cave just ahead of them where Ratri was standing.

Hiccup's eyes narrowed. "It's a cave... not a mine."

"Ah yes. Ratri was very specific about taking you to this entrance." Benen said, the smile fading from his face at the sight of his master. "I must leave you here. But I am honored to have met two of the people Finn was so fond of. And, of course, these magnificent dragons." he added, patting Toothless on the head.

Ratri stomped over as fast as he could with his cane. Benen walked away from the Hooligans and when he was in range, was slapped in the face. Hiccup and Fishlegs gaped and had to restrain themselves from attacking the sweet old man's assailant.

"You stupid slave! You take too long! You not eat tonight!" Ratri glared at the old slave and slapped him again. Benen gingerly lay on the ground before his master, hands nearly touching his feet in a silent plea for forgiveness. The cruel man turned toward the Hooligan chief and smirked at him. "You go inside alone," he paused to shoot a look at Toothless, who met his glare with a toothy growl. "No light and no supplies. If you find de boy, I will allow you to buy him for a price. But I hope you are prepared: he was expensive."

"I'm prepared for anything." Hiccup said, his voice trembling with rage. He leaned over to help Benen to his feet but the elderly man shook his head. He sighed deeply. "So just go in and find Finn?"

"Yes." Ratri pointed to the entrance. "Dat is all."

"It seems a little... easy." Fishlegs muttered to his friend, eyeing Ratri suspiciously.

"If I don't play along, I won't get my son back. I don't have a choice." Hiccup replied. He turned to the vile man who had bought his son. "I agree to your terms."

Hiccup strode forward confidently, entering the darkness of the cave within seconds. Blackness surrounded him as the entrance became smaller and smaller in the distance. Soon there was no light left. He felt along the edges, hoping that Finn would be easy to find.

"Finn!" he called, his voice echoing around him. "Buddy?"

There was suddenly a loud rumble from above him. He looked up (though it did no good whatsoever) and suddenly became aware of the sounds of loosening rocks. He took a chance and ran forward into the darkness, tripping over a rock but quickly getting up as rocks fell around him, blocking his way out. He barely escaped the falling boulders but he knew there was no way he would be able to get out the way he came. His heart constricted painfully. His son hadn't called back. And with the sudden cave in... was he still alive? His heart stopped completely when he remembered that this was how his father had died.

He could barely draw breath but he forced air into his lungs.  
"FINN!"

And still there was no answer.

\* \* \*

><p><em>All right, the reason for these quick updates is because of all the waiting I was making you do before and the fact that I'm on a writing kick after being blocked for so long! I wanted this story done by the time How to Train Your Dragon 2 came out.<em>

THERE IS A SEQUEL! It is called Taming Hearts.

Special thanks to \*\*EmmerzK\*\* for helping me write it and \*\*amyboomerang\*\* for the initial cave idea.

Don't forget to review!

~KateMarie999~

## 16. Free

We're winding down the story! Just so you know, this chapter is one I'd looked forward to writing for so long, I practically had to sit on my hands to keep myself from jumping the gun! I spent all day at work talking to myself about this scene and some Taming Hearts scenes. Actually, just so you know, I have plans for nine stories in all. My tumblr followers know a bit about the sequels following this one but I'll provide names and very brief descriptions at the end of

this story for those who don't have tumblr. And here we go!\_

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><p><strong>Chapter Sixteen: Free<strong>

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><p>Finn was awakened just before dawn quite suddenly. Ratri slammed his fist on the door to the room (well, more like a closet) he slept in and shouted that he was to be up and dressed in the next two minutes. Not one to keep the man waiting, Finn hurriedly put on the meager clothes he had and rushed into the main house thirty seconds early. Thankfully, Ratri apparently decided that this was acceptable.<p>

"You come with me!" the man demanded, shackling Finn to himself and leading him down the path to the mines.

Finn didn't dare speak up but he didn't like being led into the darkness with only a small lamp to illuminate the path. Was he to work there all day today? Did they always start this early? It seemed a bit foolhardy to work in a place as dangerous as a mine during the night hours. Natural sunlight made it a little bit safer. Finn knew that slaves were supposed to be kept alive but it didn't stop him from worrying about the possible outcome of this outing.

Ratri yanked the chain, directing Finn to what he soon realized was the back entrance he'd found the previous day. But rather than stop outside the cave's mouth, the man pulled Finn into its depths. They walked deep into the cave for a long while before Ratri finally stopped, nearly causing Finn to run into him. The boy shuddered at the thought of what the man would do to him if he hadn't caught himself.

"Yes... you safe here. Safer than others." Ratri muttered, more to himself than to his young slave. "You sit down. Stay still. No speak. I come back for you."

Ratri unlocked the shackle and pushed Finn into a small space between two large boulders. He chuckled to himself as he did so. Finn had no idea what the man was planning but he did know that it was nasty and, as the light finally left his line of sight, terrifying. He had never been afraid of the dark but the cave's darkness was so penetrating, he began to shiver with fear. He felt like he had been struck blind, that the cave would be his final resting place. He wondered if this was how his Poppy had felt just before he died. He gritted his teeth and forced the tears down. No crying. He had to be strong.

He didn't know how long he sat there. It felt like hours but probably wasn't quite that long. Suddenly, the boy heard a loud rumble from the direction of the cave's entrance. Rocks and boulders were crashing... it was a cave-in! Finn held onto Ratri's comment that he would be safe where he was. Slaves were to be kept alive... but just to be sure, he curled up and hid his face in his knees as the rumbling continued. Finally, there was dead silence. Finn wondered if he had already died. Could it be that he had been crushed so suddenly he had felt no pain? Was there nothing after life except this black expanse surrounding him? His trembling grew more violent and he prayed that he was still alive.



Then, suddenly, he heard a voice. More like an\_ echo\_ of a voice. Its owner was far away but crying out as loud as he could. Finn couldn't make out the words but the voice itself sounded \_very\_ familiar.

No. Finn shook his head, digging his fingers into his thick hair. He wasn't hearing his father's voice. It was a trick or a hallucination. The result of his sanity finally leaving him. He didn't hear \_anything\_, he decided. His mind was all he had left and he was determined to keep it intact as long as he could.

The calling voice grew closer. Finn squeezed his eyes shut as he began to be able to make out words.

"Finn!" called the voice that sounded so much like his father's. "Finn, are you down here? Finn!"

Finn clutched his hair, pulling it so that he wouldn't cry at the sound he had so desperately wanted to hear. His father was \_not\_ down there. He couldn't \_possibly\_ know where Finn had gone. In any case, his father preferred his sister. There was no way, no way at \_all\_ that his father was down there searching for him. And the steadily louder cries of his name weren't going to work. He wasn't going to succumb to the madness. He put his hands on his ears and whimpered as he breathed, trying desperately not to cry.

The sounds of footsteps joined the calls. If Hiccup were really there, he would be quite close. His cries sounded frantic. \_I'm just hearing what I want to hear\_, Finn thought, \_my dad would never be that worried about me\_.

"Finn!" the voice bellowed, the echoes reverberating in Finn's ears. "Please say something, buddy!"

Finn shook his head, his breathing growing louder so that he could block out the sound. Ratri had told him not to speak. This must have been a test. He didn't know \_why\_ his master had ordered this but it was sadistic, even for him. The boy breathed so loudly, the hissing sounds began to echo in addition to the calling voice.

"Finn?" the voice asked, this time staying in one place. "Finn, is that you? I can hear you, buddy. Just say something!"

Finn shook his head, his breathing growing louder so that he wouldn't be able to hear the voice. He wanted so desperately for this to be over. If he hadn't already died, he was beginning to wish that he would instead of being subjected to this torture. He could hear his voice echoing as his whimpering increased in volume. The footsteps ceased and he heard soft padding right up to where he was hiding. Sounds of breathing that weren't his.

And then, quite suddenly, a warm hand made contact with his knee. He screamed in surprise.

"Finn," the voice said in a gentler tone, the breath from its owner's lungs now warming his face, "don't be afraid, buddy. I'm here."

Finn looked up, his breathing shaky and labored. He couldn't see anything in front of him but he could smell the familiar leathery scent, feel the callouses on the hand's owner... the other hand made

contact with his shoulder.

He shakily breathed in, his heart pounding so hard he could hear its tiny echos. "D-daddy?"

The hands suddenly pulled him into a warm chest, its heart pounding and creating its own little echoes. His daddy had come for him! Before he could stop it, a sob escaped his throat and tears began to rain out of his eyes and into Hiccup's shoulder. The father pulled his son in closer, holding him so tightly it was almost painful.

"I'm sorry." Hiccup whispered, stroking Finn's back as gently as he could. "I'm so sorry."

Finn was incapable of responding coherently. Every emotion he had held back, every time he had wanted to cry, every second he longed for his father's embrace washed over him so that he cried harder than he could remember crying before. Hiccup patiently continued to hold him as tenderly as he could so that he wouldn't aggravate any of the injuries Ratri had inflicted. He could feel some of them through the material of the thin shirt on Finn's back. He wanted to punish Ratri for his cruelty but not now. Finn was in his arms, safe and sound. Well, safer than he had been in the last few days. It wasn't an ideal setting for a tearful reunion but as long as he had his son back, Hiccup couldn't care less.

The boy's father felt his heart break once more. His son was in tears, in part, because of the monster he had become. His little boy had suffered more than anyone his age should ever have to suffer. Hiccup was reminded of holding Adrianna in a similar fashion after her ordeal with Trista. He had felt this way then as well: relieved, overjoyed to have his child back, and horribly guilty for letting them go through it in the first place. A few tears squeezed out of his eyes as well and dripped onto his son's shoulder. If Finn had felt them, he didn't let on.

Finally, Finn found his voice. Sniffling loudly, he wiped his face with the back of his hand. "H-how did you find me?" he asked, his whole body still trembling.

"I questioned people. It wasn't so hard to figure out where you were." Hiccup said, helping his son wipe his tears away.

"I d-didn't think I'd s-see you again." Finn whimpered.

"I wasn't going to let you slip away from me, buddy. Never." Hiccup pointed to his son's chest and could feel the pounding heart beneath. "I love you, Finn. I always have and I always will."

"You promise?" Finn asked in a high voice, tears still streaming out of his eyes.

"Yes. I promise. I will always come for you. Always. No matter where you are." Hiccup sniffled and smiled, though he knew his son couldn't see it.

Finn let out another sob and allowed his father to wipe away his fresh tears. "I'm sorry I ran away." he said shakily. "Everything was so bad at home. And you told mom you're a murderer and... I was

scared."

"Oh Finn." Hiccup gripped his son's shoulders, looking where he thought his son's face was (though all he could see was the pitch blackness). "Listen, yes, I did kill a man. But the man I killed was going to take you and your mom and sister away and do horrible things to you. He would have taken everything that you and I and our family loved. Our friends, our home, the dragons. Everything. I couldn't let that happen. It's my job to protect you and your mom and sister and that was the only way I could do it."

"So you're not going to kill anyone else?" Finn asked, his voice sounding slightly more like it always had.

"I will never kill anyone unless they try to hurt you or our family. Dragons included." Hiccup brushed Finn's bangs out of his eyes (he knew, without knowing how he knew, that they had fallen into his son's line of vision). "I didn't want to kill that man. I felt horrible that I did it. But I recently found out what would have happened if I didn't. And it was disgusting. I will never let that happen." Finn sniffled and his breathing became slightly calmer, less shaky. "Life is valuable. It is precious. It's irreplaceable and to take it is a horrible, horrible thing. But to sit back and let someone take it from everyone you love without any remorse, that would be wrong too."

"Okay." Finn sighed. "It's so dark."

"Yeah, it is." Hiccup stood up, taking Finn's hand and grasping it tightly. "The way I came is caved in. I don't know if there's a way out."

Finn suddenly gasped. "There is!" he exclaimed, sounding excited for the first time in days. "I've found it before. It's... sort of this way." he tugged Hiccup's hand as they both crept farther into the cave, Finn's hand following the wall.

They walked in silence for a while. The eerie echoing of their footsteps gave them the willies but they wanted to make sure they were silent so that they could hear any coming incident. They shuffled for several minutes when Hiccup's hand suddenly slipped from Finn's. Finn gasped, suddenly terrified, but his fear lasted only a split second. He heard a clang of metal and a loud "OOF" and immediately knew what happened. He burst into peals of laughter.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh at my expense." Hiccup said, keeping his own laughter back as he got up. "I see how it is."

"You're so clumsy, dad." Finn felt for a moment before finding Hiccup's hand, now covered in dirt.

"Bah, I meant to do that." Hiccup chortled.

"Sure you did." Finn said, the grin on his face quite audible.

"Hiccup! Finn!" shouted another very familiar voice from a distance. "Are you in there? Are you okay?"

Hiccup let out a guffaw of relief. "We're here!" he called.

The cave was suddenly filled with the sounds of four feet rapidly hitting the ground. Father and son heard a familiar roar and the cave was suddenly, though briefly, filled with light. Toothless bounded forward, jumping on top of the younger Haddock and enthusiastically licking his face.

"Gah!" Finn squealed. "I missed you too, you big useless reptile!"

Toothless snorted in amusement. He allowed Finn to get to his feet before making an inviting gurgling sound.

"What do you say we escape from this cave in style?" Hiccup suggested, squeezing his son's hand.

Finn immediately hopped onto the dragon. Hiccup, feeling quite proud of his little son's instincts, climbed atop Toothless behind him.

"Let's get out of here, bud." he said, patting the dragon behind the ears.

The dragon roared, illuminating the cave ahead of them. He shot forward like an arrow, causing Finn to have to duck down so that he wouldn't be blown backwards onto his father. They were out of the cave in seconds, flying into the sunlight dozens of feet above the ground. They circled the outside of the mines three times before landing in front of the disgruntled slave owner.

"You get lucky." Ratri grumbled. "I want price I paid for the boy plus fifteen percent." he demanded in a businesslike tone.

Hiccup opened his mouth to argue... and then shut it again. "You know what?" he said, opening his satchel. "Take it all. My son is more important to me than a bunch of metal coins." he threw a bag of money on the ground in front of Ratri.

"It is a deal." Ratri exclaimed gleefully, picking up the money bag which contained almost double what he had paid for Finn.

"But I also want to buy Benen." Hiccup added.

"Him?" Ratri turned to the elderly slave, whose eyes were wide in surprise. "He is useless."

"Then you won't have any qualms about letting me have him." Hiccup said in a dangerously low tone, his dragon growling in agreement.

Ratri eyed the man, a cold look in his steel gray eyes. "Take him. I don't need useless slaves. I get better, younger ones with this money."

Hiccup wanted to vomit at the thought of what he had apparently just paid for but he choked it down. Benen's eyes filled with tears as he slowly approached Hiccup and Finn. He reached out a trembling hand and grasped Hiccup's.

"You have been too kind to me." he said, sniffing and wiping his eyes with the back of his other hand. "What can I do to repay you?"

"You've already done it." Hiccup smiled and squeezed the man's hand. "Now let's go home."

Fishlegs suddenly stepped up, making everyone jump. They'd forgotten he was there.

"I hate to be a downer," he said, not making eye contact with anyone, "but how are we going to get Benen back to Berk?" he turned to the elderly man. "Would you be willing to fly? We can go slowly."

Benen looked over at the Gronckle and his face lit up with excitement. It seemed to shave a decade off of him in an instant.

"I would be most honored." he said, reaching out and gently stroking Meatlug's snout.

"Haec res bonum nescit." Ratri said as he walked off, money bag at his waist.

"Wait!" Hiccup called, running after the old man. He stopped in front of him. "I just have to do one thing." He snatched the cane out of Ratri's hand and, before the man could react, snapped it in two over his knee. "Now you can go."

Ratri angrily stomped off, shouting words that Hiccup hoped Finn wouldn't repeat. The father turned back to his son, who stared at him with wide eyes. Hiccup winked and stroked his dragon's snout.

However, before they could take off, a woman bounded over, her face alight with excitement. Hiccup and Fishlegs recognized this woman a moment later as the woman they had spoken to the previous day. The woman to whom Fishlegs had butchered Latin in an attempt to ask where the docks were and if she had seen Finn. The group barely had time to wonder what had happened before the woman darted over to Hiccup, grabbed the front of his shirt, and planted a very deep kiss on his unsuspecting lips.

Hiccup had never kissed another woman in his life. Unless, of course, one counted his daughter, but those kisses were quite different. His eyes widened and he was stunned for a moment before he grasped the woman's shoulders and pushed her back.

"Uhh... wh-what?" he stuttered. "Fishlegs?"

Fishlegs was staring at the woman with almost as shocked an expression. Finn's face was twisted in both disgust and horror. Benen, however, raised his eyebrows and immediately started speaking in Latin to the woman. They babbled back and forth for a bit before Benen let out a shout of laughter. Through his guffaws, he explained something to the woman, who then turned to Hiccup and slapped him in the face. Hiccup's mouth dropped open and his hand flew to his now reddening cheek. Still laughing, Benen turned to the trio.

"This woman is under the impression that you asked her to marry you." he told Hiccup, wiping tears of mirth out of his eyes.

"I did \_what\_?" Hiccup exclaimed. He turned to his friend. "What did you tell her, Fishlegs?"

"Apparently not what I thought I told her." Fishlegs said in a voice full of forced nonchalance.

"I haven't laughed this much in years." Benen chortled. "Thank you."

"You're... you're not going to marry her... are you?" Finn asked, his voice sounding quite unsure.

"Absolutely not. Your mother is the love of my life. And your sister would never forgive me." Hiccup patted Toothless' saddle. "But we can't keep them waiting! What do you say, Benen?" he turned to the elderly former slave. "Want to see what's beyond Maero?"

Benen climbed atop Meatlug behind Fishlegs, looking almost at home on top of the dragon. "Do you even need to ask?"

Hiccup laughed, shaking his head. "All right, bud." he said, patting the dragon on the top of the head. "Let's go home."

Two sets of wings expanded at once and immediately, the ground fell away. Benen watched as Maero flew farther and farther away until it was a speck on the horizon. He turned back and stared at the vast expanse of ocean ahead of him. His heart leaped with joy. It had taken forty-two years but at last, after all the waiting, after all the optimism, after all the fervent praying, he was free.

He looked over at Finn, who stared back at him, and both former slaves lifted their arms into the air, allowing the cool ocean breeze to clear their senses, prepare them for a life away from the evils they had just faced.

Hiccup clutched his son with both hands, his heart pounding at the thought of what he would face when he returned home. But the weight he had carried was lifted and his son was coming home. Whatever happened, he could face it. He knew that without a doubt.

He rested his cheek against Finn's head and held him closer to his chest. "I love you, buddy."

Finn looked up at him with a beaming smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling and mouth split in a grin from the pure joy he felt at finally being free. "Love you too, dad."

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><p><em>Two chapters to go! I'm so happy right now! Benen has been added to the cast of characters and I couldn't be happier!<em>

\_In case you can't tell, I am ready for this story to be over so I'm just going to post when I finish the chapters. I want to have Taming Hearts well underway by the time I see the movie. Planning has gone really well and just today it went from being a stupid filler story to one I'm actually looking forward to writing! You're in for a wild ride! Literally, in some cases, since the kids will finally be getting dragons of their own!\_

\_Also, this will be in the next or final chapter, but Ratri's plan was to cause a cave-in that killed Hiccup so that he could keep Finn as his slave. Dumb plan but the man didn't have much time to come up with it!\_

\_Special thanks to \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for little edits and additions and to \_\_\*\*amyboomerang\*\*\_\_ for some ideas.\_

\_Don't forget to review!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

\_P.S. Here are brief descriptions of the sequels in the planning stages. I have little story arcs that will pan out. In fact, several have started with this very story. So keep your eyes open! Bear in mind that everything is subject to change but I think the general summaries will remain at least similar.\_

**\_Taming Hearts\_**

><strong>\_The time has finally come for the Haddock children to start training their own dragons. But getting the dragons to trust their new riders turns out to be the easy part. And with Thawfest coming up, competition is running rampant as everyone tries to win at all costs. But a betrayal of trust causes a horrible consequence no one was expecting and now it's up to the Haddocks to put things right.\_

**\_Nothing to Fear\_**

><strong>\_While Hiccup and Adrianna are away, a nasty disease starts spreading all over Berk. It's up to them to get the ingredients for a complicated cure before people start dying. Meanwhile Finn is suddenly thrust into leadership when Astrid falls victim to the disease.\_

**\_Growing Pains\_**

><strong>Finn has begun pushing boundaries now that puberty is in full swing and has become a danger to everyone, including himself. And try as they might, Hiccup and Astrid can't seem to make him understand the seriousness of what he's doing. Meanwhile, a mysterious young man washes ashore, claiming that he is the last survivor of a shipwreck. The evidence backs up his story but one Berkian isn't convinced.\_

**\_Hiccups\_**

><strong>The Haddock girl knew the risks she was taking. She knew the consequences of breaking this law would be dire if she was caught. But she didn't care. She had to prove that she wasn't a coward. But an unintended consequence of her actions exposes her crime and it's all the Haddocks can do to prevent her from being banished.\_

**\_Father's Day\_**

><strong>One of the Haddocks is targeted by a hostile tribe and it's up to the others to prevent a war while also getting their family member back safely. But because of complicated laws and an unfortunate sequence of events, that might not be possible.\_

\_The long awaited Hiccstrid reunion awaits! Just a warning, this is probably the most potent lime flavor any of these chapters will ever have, probably. I will never write any lemons but you know where it's headed before I cut it off. Enjoy!\_

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><p><strong>Chapter Seventeen: Home Sweet Home<strong>

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><p>Adrianna had a tendency to be a very talkative child, so when she stomped to the Larsons' in a rage, several people asked what was wrong. She refused to respond, deciding to sulk for a while before going to the records building and picking out a few simple-to-read books so that she could entertain herself quietly for a while. She considered this decision to be one of the best she'd ever made. The books transported her to new worlds and introduced her to exciting characters. It was slow going since she was new to reading but she enjoyed herself immensely. In fact, it was dark outside before she realized just how long she had been gone. Vikings weren't big readers so it was no surprise that no one had walked into the records building. She preferred the still silence.<p>

Figuring that it would be wisest to go to the Larsons' before the sun set completely, she headed back and kept her head down, staying silent and pretending she was invisible. She didn't want to think about what she'd just heard. On the contrary, she had just read a wonderful story about a girl, much like herself, who had found herself in a magical land far, far away from her dreary home. How Adrianna wished she could be like the girl in the book. She certainly wouldn't have to worry about her parents divorcing anymore. Or anything else, really, except where to explore each day.

Erick knew his friend was upset without even seeing her very clearly on the path to the house. Her slumped shoulders, hair hanging in front of her face, and hands swinging by her sides were very obvious signals. He mightn't have known it was her at all if he hadn't caught sight of the purple skirt that swished around her knees as she walked and the red flower woven into her blonde locks. She was an easy person to spot in a crowd but she seemed to be trying to hide herself away. It was for this reason that Erick did not do any more than greet her when she walked in. He watched her walk to his sisters' room and shut the door behind her. She didn't emerge all night.

The next morning, he was very surprised to find her already out of the house when he was awake. Adrianna was not a morning person (neither was he, for that matter, but he generally rose before her). He had a funny feeling in his gut that he should go after her. His best friend was obviously upset and it didn't do any good to try to bottle it all up inside.

It didn't take a lot of thinking to figure out where she had gone. She liked quiet on mornings like this. It was a sunny day, so she was likely to want to spend it outside. He could think of only one place outside that brought her any sort of comfort.

Troll Bridge, which was what they had called it when they thought they'd tracked down a sleeping troll beneath it, was their hideaway.



It featured a lot of trees to block out the worst of the sun's rays and heavy snow in the winter. The bridge was sturdy but quite old, with weeds and vines covering it so it almost looked as if nature had made it rather than humans. Beneath the bridge was a creek, though not a deep one. Across the bridge was a cave. Erick and Adrianna had ventured into it a little way but neither of them much liked the dark and were a bit timid about going in too far, especially considering what had happened to Stoick. The cave mostly served as shelter for the rain or heavy snow, but beyond that, they steered clear. They much preferred to pretend they were great adventurers and search for treasure. Their most interesting find had been a fossil. Hiccup had been very interested in it when they showed it to him. He praised his daughter and her friend for their find and the girl had been all smiles for days.

On this particular day, Erick immediately spotted his friend sitting on the bridge, swinging her feet over the edge, and pitching sticks and rocks into the creek. She had no flower in her hair. Though it wasn't intentional on her part, those who knew her best knew that she only forgot to put a flower in her hair on days when she was especially upset. Perhaps the flowers were her way of expressing her cheerfulness. As this was a fairly new habit she'd picked up, Erick wasn't entirely certain but he could tell from her glum expression that something was wrong.

"Hey." he said timidly, walking up to the end of the bridge. "You okay?"

His friend didn't respond. She angrily pitched another rock into the creek, where it landed with an audible splash. Erick shifted his weight to his other foot, feeling slightly awkward. Adrianna was usually the one who talked most of the time. He enjoyed listening to the many things her brain seemed to conjure up on the spot. A silent Adrianna was not a happy Adrianna.

"Listen, I know something's wrong." Erick took a step forward. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Adrianna finally focused her bright green gaze on him. Her brow furrowed. "No." she said. "I'd rather tell you a story."

"A... a story?"

"Yes." Adrianna stood up, brushing dirt off her skirt. "I've been thinking about it for a while and... I know how it begins now."

Erick had no idea how to respond to this so he remained silent. Adrianna took this as her cue to begin her story.

"Once upon a time," she said, her eyes glazing over a bit, "the two greatest performers in the world: an escapologist, who could escape from any lock that was ever invented, and an acrobat, who was so skilled it seemed as if she could actually fly, fell in love and got married." she clasped her hands in front of her face, staring at her fingers for a moment before turning back to Erick. "They performed some of the most incredible feats together that anyone has ever seen and people would come from miles around! Kings! Queens! Traders! And... knights! And not just to see their skill, but also to see their love for each other, which was so deep that it was said that

Gronckles would purr as they passed them..." Adrianna suddenly trailed off, blinking a few times, her hands beginning to tremble. "And... and Monstrous Nightmares would... would w-weep with j-joy..." she let out a sob, her story nearly forgotten. Her hand moved to her mouth to try to stifle it but there was no stopping her tears. Erick moved forward. "N-no, I'm okay." she squeaked. "Except... except they \_didn't\_ love each other. Even th-though everyone thought they did because it s-seemed like they d-did. Because that's what l-love really is. It's n-not real."

"Anna, what's going on?" Erick asked, taking a step forward.

Adrianna flinched. "It d-doesn't matter."

"Yes it does." Erick ventured forward again. "Come on, Annie, just tell me."

Adrianna shook her head but she didn't shy away from him again. "My parents are b-breaking up."

"What?"

"Y-yeah, they were f-fighting but I d-didn't think th-they'd break up." Adrianna sniffled loudly. "They're s-supposed to love each other! 'Cause if they c-can't, they can't l-love me or Finn. Not r-really."

Erick had no idea what to say. Adrianna usually wanted a hug when she was this upset but she kept inching away from him. Her arms twitched slightly, almost as if she wanted to throw her arms around him but was afraid of getting hurt once more.

"Annie..." Erick sighed. "I'm sorry that's happening. I don't know what to say."

"Promise me something." Adrianna sniffled again and wiped her nose. "Promise you're always going to be my friend."

"Annie-"

"Promise! 'Cause if you're not, I don't want to be friends anymore." Adrianna exclaimed in a rather shrill voice.

Erick hesitated for a moment. True, he and Adrianna had been friends for over three years. But she was a \_girl\_ and other boys didn't have best friends who were girls. He'd already been teased a few times. But, then again, it wasn't like she could \_stop\_ being a girl. And, in actuality, he much preferred time with her over time with other boys his age. But friends... \_forever\_? Was that even possible? Did people ever stay friends with those they'd been friends with so early on? Would he have to force himself to be friends with her later even if he didn't want to? What if she did something horrible? Would he have to stay friends with her even if the whole village hated her? He looked into her eyes for a moment and knew that \_that\_ wasn't going to happen. There was no way Adrianna, the girl who let the butterflies she caught go, would ever do anything that would make everyone hate her. So, he supposed, she'd never do anything to make \_him\_ hate her either.

Of course, he also hated it when she cried. So much that he would do just about anything to make her feel better. That meant they were best friends, didn't it?

"Yeah. I promise." Erick said, slowly approaching her and allowing her ample time to run away. "I'm not like your parents, Anna. I mean... I won't just give up because it's hard." She shook her head, shuffling backward a bit more. Erick took a confident step forward, reaching out a hand. "Anna... do you trust me?"

Adrianna let out a sob and threw herself into his arms. He stumbled backward a bit, not expecting a girl that small to be able to propel herself forward with such force. As she buried her face into his shoulder and let out her tears, he felt his heart flutter a bit. But, even though he thought about it for hours after getting home, he simply couldn't figure out why.

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><p>Finn had never flown for longer than thirty minutes at a time. But it took much longer than that to get back to Berk. The sun was high in the sky before the familiar island became visible on the horizon. Though he wasn't gone long, he felt slightly nervous. Would his mother be angry at him? Worse still, would his mother be angry at his father? He promised himself that, no matter how bad things got, he wouldn't run away again but he wasn't sure if he could handle more fighting.<p>

As Berk came into view, Hiccup's stomach began to churn. Astrid was somewhere down there. Her note had been a source of comfort but once she saw him in person, would things change? Everything seemed to have turned upside down for him. He had gone from desperately wanting to escape his life with Astrid to wanting her back more than ever. He was high above his home when he spotted the familiar blonde head in the small crowd that gathered to welcome him home. His wife was standing at the front, patiently waiting for them to land.

Finn slid off Toothless and was nearly bowled over by his mother. She got on her knees and squeezed him so tightly, his injuries began to throb. But he didn't care, not one bit, because he had missed her so much it had ached. He wanted to cry again but he held back, wiping his eyes on his mother's shoulder (thankfully devoid of the metal that day). She didn't seem to notice. When they finally broke apart, his tears had ceased and two identical pairs of blue eyes ecstatically locked.

"I missed you, mom." Finn said, his face breaking into a wide smile. "And I'm staying home this time."

"I am so sorry, Finn." Astrid leaned forward and kissed her son on his forehead. "And I missed you too, buddy. I promise, no more yelling and fighting."

Finn nodded, his cheeks beginning to become sore from all the smiling he had done all day. Astrid ruffled his hair and then looked up just in time to see her husband slip off of his dragon. Their eyes locked.

Hiccup swallowed and his eyes quickly dropped to the ground, unable to stay in contact with his wife's any longer. He felt the tears

dripping down his face before he could stop them; he couldn't even look at her, he was so ashamed of how he had treated her all this time. Why did any of her behavior give him any excuse to treat her the way he did? And what in the world would ever give her a reason to forgive him? He deserved every hit that she may have in store for him. He deserved every bit of neglect or anger she might inflict on him. He would take it because he deserved every bit of it. Hands were on his face before he could reopen his eyes, thumbs brushing his tears aside. He opened his eyes to see teary azure eyes looking up at him and a forgiving smile on her lips.

"Shh..." Astrid whispered.

Hiccup held onto her wrist and kissed it gently. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry."

Astrid stood on her tiptoes and rested her forehead on his. "We'll talk more later, but I forgive you. I am every bit as much to blame for all of this as you are. I shoved you away. But I don't care what happens from here on out, know this: I love you, Hiccup Haddock. I love you more than anything in this world." Astrid smiled through her words, fingers brushing into the hair by his ear. A few tears dripped down her cheeks when he saw the love grow in her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere. And neither are the kids."

"Astrid..." Hiccup shook his head with a wistful smile. "Why do you ever put up with me?"

Astrid smiled knowingly. "It was part of the contract. I signed up for this for life."

Hiccup didn't waste another minute. He pulled his wife into his arms and kissed her as firmly as he could. Astrid's hands rested on his face and she giggled when he lifted her off the ground. The villagers cheered and whistled around them, but went ignored. It was the longest kiss they had shared in forever and nothing could break them apart.

Except their son, who growled in disgust. "Blech."

Astrid broke the kiss with a breathy smile but didn't pull back. She rested her forehead on her husband's and met his eyes. So green, so full of life again, so full of mischief and love and devotion and passion.

She brushed her thumbs over his eyebrows and down to his cheeks. "I missed you."

Hiccup smirked. "I missed me too." She slapped his arm, making a few jerk in surprise. Hiccup grinned. "But I missed you more."

Arms growing tired, he finally set her down on the ground in front of him. Small arms wrapped around his waist and he looked to see an identical pair of green eyes looking up at him. He nearly cried with relief; the last time he had seen her, she hadn't looked so beautiful, so innocent, so kind and gentle. Adrianna was safe and she was his.

"Addie!" he pulled her into his arms and also lifted her off the ground.

Adrianna hugged her daddy as tight as he could without strangling him. A few tears slipped out of her eyes and she too knew that her daddy was back. He wasn't angry; he stood tall and handsome again, eyes bright and kind and happy. She couldn't be happier.

"I'm sorry I didn't hug you sooner." he whispered.

"It's okay, daddy..." Adrianna whispered back. "You needed to be with mommy first." she glanced over to her mother and then back at her father. "So... you love each other again?"

Astrid breathed a laugh and gently smoothed out her daughter's hair. "We never stopped. Not really."

"But you said..."

"I know, Addie. Sometimes people make bad choices when they're mad, or scared, or stressed. But that doesn't mean they mean all the mean things they say..." Hiccup paused for a second. "That make sense?"

Adrianna nodded, wiping her eyes again as fresh, blissfully happy tears began to drip down her face. Astrid reached into her satchel and brought out a small pile of papers.

"Well, I don't think we'll be needing these anymore." she said with a grin, handing the divorce papers to her daughter. "What do you think we should do with them?"

Adrianna giggled and ripped them in half, crumpling them in her fists. There were sighs of relief all over the crowd. She then made eye contact with Toothless and tossed them his way. The Night Fury shot a plasma blast at them, igniting the papers and leaving them unrecognizable.

"Well, looks like our family has weathered yet another storm." Hiccup said, beckoning for Finn to come closer and placing a hand on his shoulder. "And we got through it, just like we always do."

"And we always will." Astrid kissed her husband on the cheek. "I promise."

"Well," said Benen, stepping forward and causing several onlookers to wonder when he had come from, "I don't know what your problems were but you, strong Finn, have the most beautiful family I have ever seen."

Astrid beamed and looked down at her son. "And who is this gentleman?"

Finn beamed. "Mom, this is Benen. He was my..." he paused, rather embarrassed for the surrounding villagers to hear the word slave. Especially his group of friends standing close by... "mentor." Finn gestured to his mother. "Benen, this is my mom, Astrid."

Benen beamed at him. He patted the boy's shoulder lovingly before turning to Astrid and dipping his head and taking her hand in his.

"Tis a pleasure to meet you, milady." he said as he kissed her fingers

Astrid smirked at Hiccup. "Oh, a man after my own heart." Hiccup snorted, unable to keep the smirk off his face.

Benen let go of Astrid's hand and got down on his knees in front of Adrianna. "And you must be Finn's young sister, Adrianna." he took her hand and kissed it as well. Adrianna giggled and blushed; she had never been treated like a lady before. "Lovely name. As lovely as your eyes. Just like your father's."

Hiccup raised his eyebrows. "Are you saying I have lovely eyes, Benen?"

"You said it, not me. One should not be so prideful, chief." Hiccup gaped. Several people laughed at Benen's triumphant smirk. For a former slave and being silent for so long, Benen sure had a witty sense of humor.

"Oh, I definitely like him." Astrid said, nudging her husband as he helped Benen back to his feet.

"There's gonna be a War of the Wits before long." Hiccup smirked.

Adrianna grinned as well, one hand resting on her hip. "I could join it too!"

"Ohhh, sassy that one." Benen chuckled, poking Hiccup's arm. "She's going to be a fun teenager."

"I look forward to it." Hiccup deadpanned.

"Well," Gobber said, stepping forward and facing Hiccup and Astrid, "I'm sure you want to catch up. I can take the kids to my workshop for a bit. And Benen too; he needs new clothes and I'm sure I can re-size some of my old clothes so he can wear them before getting some of his own."

"Thank you, sir." Benen cheerfully shook Gobber's hand. "I would be most honored."

"I can show you around too." Finn added.

"I can't imagine a better way to spend an afternoon." Benen said, the smile just about plastered to his face. "Lead the way."

Hiccup and Astrid watched their young son and his newest friend until they were out of sight. Adrianna stood, hands clasped behind her back. She wanted to come too but she thought it would be best for Finn to do this alone.

"What do you say, Anna? Another reading lesson?" Gobber offered.

"You mean... archery?" Adrianna's smile widened when Gobber nodded. "Can Erick come too?"

Gobber looked over at the wavy haired boy and back to Adrianna. He

didn't know Erick very well but it couldn't hurt give him a few lessons as well. He nodded again and led the boy and girl to his workshop.

"I guess that leaves us." Hiccup turned to his wife.

Hiccup held out his hand, which Astrid took without thought or question. They turned toward the path to their house, smiling at everyone they passed. Not many people stopped to talk, a couple waved or nodded back; a few scowled and turned away to their homes or stores. Hiccup swallowed the knot in his throat; he owed the village an apology as well. This thought led to another before he found himself thinking of his possible removal from office

But not right now. He needed to focus on Astrid and only Astrid right now. Even if they did remove him from office, his only responsibility was fixing his marriage. Because even as some people had told him already, if he couldn't handle his marriage, how could he possibly handle an entire village?

They walked in silence and before they knew it, their house appeared before them. Smoke blew out of the chimney, presumably from a meal cooking or boiling water for laundry. Emotion bubbled in Hiccup's chest at seeing his their home again. A knot formed in his throat again at what he had planned to do in order to rid himself of the pain he had been feeling. He never wanted to see this place again, the house that he nearly built with his own hands, the house that he and his wife started their new life together and that his children grew up in we were growing up in. He stopped in front of the door, the wooden step creaking underneath his prosthetic. Astrid looked at him with a look of concern to see tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. How selfish could he possibly get to leave his wife and children for all eternity?

Astrid pulled his hand to her chest, regaining his attention again. She smiled at him tenderly and continued up the steps, pulling him after her. Hiccup stepped into the house, surges of emotion beginning to rage as Astrid closed the door. She stood in front of him again and Hiccup nearly broke down right there.

"Astrid Astrid, I'm sorry Astrid" Hiccup choked. Astrid wrapped her arms around him, tears of her own springing to her eyes. "Honey, I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry!" her husband sobbed into her shoulder.

"I forgive you, I promise, Hiccup-" Astrid tried to soothe him, but he couldn't stop.

"That doesn't change the fact that I treated you like absolute garbage, Astrid!" Hiccup stared at her with puffy eyes. His exhaustion wasn't lost on her. He may be back to his old self, but he certainly hadn't slept well in a long time.

Astrid brushed his bangs out of his eyes. Before voicing her thoughts, she pulled him over to the couch so they could sit and talk more comfortably. They sat side by side, arms wrapped around each other, hands moving hair or brushing each other's face; the tenderness of physical contact was needed and necessary.

"You weren't very nice. At all." Astrid sighed, forcing him to maintain eye contact. "You were angry, all the time. You hated

being in the same room as me, so you wouldn't try. You wouldn't talk or even look me in the eye." Tears rolled down her face and Hiccup opened his mouth to apologize again, but she stopped him with a few fingers on his lips. "No no, letâ€¦ please let me finish." Hiccup bit his lip and nodded for her to continue. "You were selfish and hateful and impatient and cruel. But you didn't get that way on your own."

"Astrid-

"No. Hiccup, I said just as many hateful things. I shoved you away; I acted just as self-righteous and proud as you did." Astrid licked her lips and took a calming breath. "When I married you, I made a promise to you to stand by you when you needed me and aid you when you were hurt or distressed, to help you fight your fights. Those fights aren't just physical, they're also emotional. The fights up here," Astrid tapped his temple with a single finger. "Are just as important as the fights out there," she nodded toward the window. "I didn't help you or stand by you. You risked everything, your family, your tribe and your own \_life\_. You've even got the scars to prove it." Astrid ran her fingers down the long scar on his neck. "All I did was spit you in the face for it."

Hiccup sniffed and shrugged. "I guess I could have used a little supportâ€¦"

"We're getting there." Astrid smiled a little. "You needed every single bit of support I could muster." Her fingers dove into his hair and massaged his scalp while he hummed appreciatively. "I said it before and I'll say it again: I love you, Hiccup, and I forgive you for everything. Justâ€¦ promise me you won't ever turn into that monster again."

"I promise." Hiccup replied instantly with conviction. "And I forgive you too. Iâ€¦" Gods, how was he going to say this? "I'm sorry that I didn'tâ€¦ plan to come back. It's surreal to think that I was ever that farâ€¦ gone."

Astrid nodded, still brushing her fingers through his hair. "What changed your mind?"

Hiccup pursed his lips and she felt him tense. "Iâ€¦ had a nightmare," he nearly whispered, eyes downcast.

Astrid was afraid to ask him, but she knew he needed to talk about it. "What happened?"

Hiccup sighed, pulling her hand from his hair to hold it. "I'll start at the beginningâ€¦ but brace yourself."

Nothing could have prepared Astrid for the horrific experience her husband had endured in his subconscious. In the end she had to be honest; yes, the nightmare snapped her husband back into his old self, but she never would have wished it to have been this terrifying, this painful, this full of tortureâ€¦ the nightmare was the embodiment of all things abominable. Tears dripped down his face when retelling the dream, his face full of anguish when he told her how their children died: Addie by Dagur's very hands, Finn by a mob of callous, heartless people. Astrid shivered herself when told of the abuse she endured, the pain of losing her children after her



husband's death, and her blood ran cold at the scene of Dagur's death by her own hand. Hiccup's hands shook as he told the tale and his voice wobbled, and he didn't refrain from telling the details as he didn't know how he could explain without downplaying anything.

The couple had lost track of time when Hiccup finally stopped speaking. A lock of golden hair fallen from her braid wrung around his forefinger, an easy distraction from her probing eyes. She cocked her head to catch his finally drying eyes.

"I'm sorry," Astrid sighed. "That'sâ€¦ I've never heard of a nightmare that bad."

Hiccup shivered. "I just hope it never happens againâ€¦ I mean, I'm back to my old self and I'm trying, really trying to let Brawn and Dagur go. But I have the feeling that it won't just happen one time and never again," he smiled wistfully. "Why is it sleep is one thing I need so dearly, yet no matter what I do it escapes me?"

"Sleep will come. You still have me, after all." Astrid smiled and kissed his forehead.

Hiccup hummed thoughtfully. "Really?" he gently pushed her bangs behind her ear as he continued, "How's that? Because that mischievous glint in your eyes couldn't possibly put me to sleep."

Astrid's smirk widened. "Not until I wear you out first."

Hiccup's eyes widened and jaw dropped before Astrid seized his mouth with hers, roughly pushing his back against the couch. A squeak of surprise sounded from Hiccup's throat before a thrill swooped through his stomach. Astrid's mouth moved fast and hot against his, which he hadn't felt inâ€¦ he couldn't even remember. He didn't think he'd ever experience anything like this with her again. He felt his breath hitch as his brain crackled with memories and tried to catch up with her.

A moan escaped him when she bit his lip, sending shivers through him. "Astridâ€¦" he murmured.

"Hush." Astrid commanded without preamble before capturing his mouth again.

Her hands pulled at his leather vest and buttoned shirt below before her nails began to scrape his collarbone. Hiccup moaned again at the pain and pleasure of it, and finally his limbs caught up with her movements. He grasped her by the hips and pulled her into his lap, making her squeal in surprise. His hands ghosted her waist and traveled the plains of her back before his fingers found her hair. He drew his lips away from hers to warmly caress her neck while he pulled the ties and pins out of her long locks. Astrid gasped and sighed at every kiss on her sensitive skin below her ear and the curve of her neck.

Tendrils of curly golden hair enveloped him when he finally loosed her braid and he hummed happily at the overwhelming scent of honey and mint. Astrid pressed her thin frame closer against his, her knees pressing to his ribcage in a hot straddle that sent eager shivers through him. A little voice in the back of his mind pointed out that, yes, he had indeed chosen the most amazing woman in the world to

marry. His fingers dove into her hair to pull her impossibly closer, their mouths inseparable.

His fingers tucked under the belt of her skirt, searching for the hem of her shirt. Blue orbs hovered over green as she drew away for a moment and swiftly pulled her blue shirt over her head in one fluid movement. He smirked but was internally dismayed to find a white undershirt still in the way, but that didn't stop him from planting a kiss on the hollow of her throat and slowly making his way down. Astrid shoved her hands into his hair and pressed him closer, a hot sigh escaping her throat and sounding in his ear.

"Hiccupâ€¦" she whimpered, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing his temple. "H-how long has it been?"

Hiccup sighed and pulled his head up, shaking her loose hair away from his eyes. "I haven't the foggiest."

"Well then, my husband," Astrid gave him her most seductive expression, which she was pleased to see replicated. "I do believe it is time to change that."

Astrid placed one foot on the ground, grabbed her shirt with one hand and her husband's hand with the other and yanked him to his feet. Hiccup laughed in surprise when his beautiful, amazing wife nearly dragged him up the stairs (he silently thanked the gods he didn't trip on the way up). Reaching the master bedroom, Hiccup kicked the door closed with his prosthetic, and the world and all its problems were soon forgotten.

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><p><em>One chapter left! And planning for <em>\_Taming Hearts\_\_ has begun! There will be no extras chapter with this because no one likes those, it seems.\_

\_Special thanks to \_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_ for lots of help toward the end.\_

\_Let me know what you think!\_

## 18. Redemption

\_Final chapter! Hooray!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Eighteen: Redemption<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Astrid liked the feeling a warm body in bed next to her. She hadn't noticed how much she'd desired it until Hiccup had stopped sleeping in the master bedroom for weeks at a time. And even when he did, he never stayed until morning and certainly never touched her. All this had changed in the span of one wonderful afternoon. They napped for an hour, both feeling quite worn out by the day's activities, and awoke as the sun was high in the sky.<p>

Hiccup awoke first, his arms around his beautiful wife and his body feeling relaxed for the first time in far too long. He breathed in the familiar mint and honey scent of her hair, smiling to himself at the memory of the events following their impromptu nap. Astrid awoke a few minutes later, happy to feel strong arms around her waist, gently stroking the silky smooth nightshirt she'd slipped on before curling into his arms. She heard him sigh with contentment just above her head.

"Hey." she said as she turned her body so that she faced her husband.

"Hey." he replied, reaching up and brushing some loose strands of hair from in front of her face.

"How did you sleep?" she whispered, fingers brushing against Hiccup's cheek and making their way down to his chest.

Hiccup smiled. "Best sleep I've had in weeks. And that was just for an hour."

"Imagine the kind of sleep you'll have tonight." Astrid placed her hand behind her husband's shoulder and gently pulled him in. "You've got something you didn't have before. Me."

"Don't I know it." Hiccup kissed her on the forehead. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Forgiving me. I didn't deserve it." Hiccup gently ran his fingers through her hair.

"That's the thing about forgiveness. No one deserves it. But that's why we have to. Because we don't either."

"Are you always this philosophical or is that new?"

"Our daughter may have rubbed off on me. A little."

"A little, huh?" Hiccup chuckled. "Okay sure."

"Speaking of which." Astrid's voice became serious. "She had a... an incident. Two nights ago. And I've been thinking about it but I can't make sense of it."

"What sort of incident? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. Well... she acted okay the next day. But I didn't bring it up." Astrid paused. "Has she ever mentioned anything about an escapologist? Maybe in a nightmare or... or just in general?"

Hiccup furrowed his brow. "Does she know what that is? We've never had one come to perform. Haven't in... gods, a little over twenty years."

"That's what I thought. But we were reading this book and the word 'escapologist' came up and she threw the book across the room. Wouldn't touch it again and then was sort of... far away. Like reliving something." Astrid's eyebrow furrowed at the memory, concern

for her daughter taking over her features. It warmed Hiccup's heart to see her concerned for their daughter about something. ."

Hiccup's eyes closed briefly. "A flashback. That's... odd."

Astrid nodded in agreement. "That's what I thought too. What do you think it means?"

Hiccup sighed. "I think it means we don't know the full story."

Astrid huffed and sprawled back on the bed. Hiccup leaned on his elbow to look down at her, his fingers rubbing the material of her nightgown at her hip. "That's what I was afraid of. So now what do we do?"

Hiccup frowned in thought, his fingers gently trailing across her stomach. "We can't confront her. I guess we'll just... hope she tells is one day."

They were silent for a few moments until Astrid turned her head to face him. "Is that all we can do?"

"Pretty much," Hiccup replied through pursed lips.

Astrid raised her right hand and pushed her fingers through his hair, pulling a warm sigh from his throat. Her nails gently pulled against the back of his neck. She grinned when Hiccup bit his lips to keep from moaning in pleasure and begging her to stop driving him absolutely insane.

"How was Finn?"

Hiccup rested his hand on her belly as he gathered his thoughts. He told her of the evil slave master Ratri and his plot to have him killed so he could keep Finn as a slave. He told her of his reunion with Finn in the belly of the cave and all the injuries on Finn's young body from the man's beatings.

"He'll probably have scars for the rest of his life."

"I'll have to treat those. I can't imagine him letting is take him to the healer's. "So," her eyes lowered for a moment as she processed this information. "Why did Ratri make you go into that cave in the first place?"

"I think he caused the cave-in to kill me so I wouldn't be able to retrieve Finn." Hiccup shook his head. "But I can't even begin to explain to you the thought processes of a man like that."

Astrid's face darkened. "If I could get my hands on that sick, twisted pig, I'd-"

"I know." Hiccup nodded. "Believe me, I know."

"I'm thankful he didn't have to stay in that place for long and that he met Benen."

"You can say that again."

Astrid pushed his shoulder so he lay back on the bed. She leaned over him, her hair casting a curtain over him that blocked out everything but framed her eyes.

He smiled up at her. "What?"

"We need to make some changes."

Hiccuped laughed. "Yeah, we do."

"First, off we are doing this more often. We're not putting this off for that long again."

Hiccup hummed. "I think I can live with that."

"I figured," Astrid winked. "Second, we're going to give each of our kids equal attention. I'm going to spend more time with Adri, and-

"Adri?"

Astrid nodded with a smile. "Yeah... My nickname for her, we decided."

"I like it." Hiccup said, resting his head on her shoulder. "Anyway, and?"

"And you're going to spend more time with Finn, and not just to teach him about chiefly duties."

"Agreed."

Silence permeated the room again. Astrid turned her head to look at him after a couple minutes. His eyes met hers and he raised his eyebrows questioningly. Astrid grinned devilishly and pushed his shoulders back on the bed, ignoring his surprised gasp. She wrapped her leg around his hip and pulled herself on top of him, giggling at his widening eyes. Resting her chin on her hands, elbows on either side of his head, she peered down at him with a seductive smile. "How about another round?"

Hiccup scoffed a laugh, but couldn't resist resting his hands on her lower back. "Do you want to wear me out? I still have to pick up the kids."

"I could pick them up."

Hiccup ignored the seriousness in her voice and turned his head away from her probing lips. "Mmm, you could," He nudged her face away from his neck with his nose. "But I think it would be better if I did it. I'm not \_that \_tired and irresponsible, besides."

Astrid pouted. "Hiccuuuuuup-"

"Astriiiiiiiiiiiiiid," Hiccup whined back before he as struck with inspiration. With a triumphant smirk, Hiccup dug his fingers into her waist just below her ribs.

Astrid screamed indignantly and tried to scramble off of him. "NO STOP!"

Hiccup wrapped his right leg around her left, keeping her from fleeing. Her laughs echoed through the bedroom until she finally managed to wriggle free. Before she could fully escape, Hiccup floored them over so he lay on top of her. He held one of her wrists down with his knee and ignored her frantic screams for mercy. He laughed triumphantly when she began to scream even louder at his probing fingers, tears of mirth dripping down her face.

Hiccup only stopped when she began to cough and finally roared, "DONT MAKE KICK YOU!"

Sitting back on his knees, sitting over hers, he grinned down at her. She clutched her sides as she tried to catch her breath, her blue eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

A moment later she finally wheezed, "Payback will be sweet, my dear."

Hiccup gulped and nervously giggled. "I look forward to it."

He swung his legs over the bed and reached for his button down shirt. He frowned when he looked at it, sighing as he realized that this was his only clean shirt from his travels. He raised an eyebrow at Astrid, who merely smirked at him.

\* \* \*

><p>"One more stitch should do it and... there you go." Benen smiled proudly. "One perfect cloth flower, if I do say so myself. And now you can continue to wear them in the winter."<p>

Adrianna beamed at the elderly man, pulling apart the string and tucking it under the flower so that the stitches would hold. She admired her work, eyes wide with wonder. Had she really made something so... so pretty all on her own? Well, it wasn't all her; she'd had a very good teacher.

"Why don't you try it on?" Benen suggested. Adrianna clipped the flower into her hair and looked at the former slave. "Beautiful. You should make more. Purple suits you quite well but there's a whole rainbow of colors that would make your lovely smile brighter."

"Thank you, Benen. Where did you learn to make these?" Adrianna asked, hopping over to a mirror to take a look for herself.

"Long ago, I was in love with a woman who liked to wear flowers much like you do." Benen sighed, a small smile brightening his features as his thoughts turned to Aida. "I used to make them for her and leave them where she could find them. I am so happy I haven't lost my touch."

Finn shook his head, his nose crinkling. "Anna's already girly enough."

"Well, dear boy, your sister is a girl." Benen chuckled. "And one day, you might find femininity more appealing."

"I don't think so." Finn placed his chin in his hand. "Girls are

so... so \_weird\_."

"Just because you and I may not understand them doesn't mean they are, as you put it, weird." Benen placed a hand on the boy's knee. "It is through our differences that we learn to appreciate each other."

"Well said." Hiccup exclaimed from the forge's window. "Well, Benen, I see you've kept my kids happy while my wife and I have been patching up our relationship."

"Your family is wonderful, Hiccup. I am happy to help." Benen replied. "Though your friend Gobber has been offering much needed assistance. He showed your son here how to make an arrow head. And then your daughter shot it through the target over there." he gestured to a target with an arrow directly in the center. "She has a good eye."

"That she does." Hiccup walked into the forge and was nearly bowled over by his little girl. "Easy there, Addie!"

"I missed you." Adrianna's voice was slightly muffled since her head was pressed into her daddy's leather vest.

"I missed you too, sweetie." Hiccup gently pried her arms off his waist and took a good look at her. "That flower makes you look very pretty. Did Benen show you how to make it?"

"Yeah he did! And he's going to help me make others too!" Adrianna exclaimed with a gleeful hop.

"Now Benen," Hiccup turned to the elderly man, who serenely met his gaze. "If you turn my daughter into the prettiest girl on Berk, I'm going to have to fight the boys off my lawn!"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take." Benen stood and playfully tugged a strand of the girl's hair. "Not that she needs my help."

Adrianna blushed scarlet. Finn, however, had his eyes fixed on the shirt his father wore under the vest.

"Dad," he said, one eyebrow raised. "Where did all your buttons go?"

Gobber, who had just walked into the room, snorted and covered his mouth with a hand. Hiccup shot a glare in his direction before turning back to his son, his mind racing.

"Your mother didn't like them. In fact, I don't think she likes this shirt." he said, pulling the open shirt closed as best he could.

Thankfully, his son didn't press the issue.

\* \* \*

><p>"And I know I can't make it up to you all at once. I only ask for a second chance so that I can prove how truly sorry I am for what I put the village through these last two years." Hiccup stopped to take a breath, his eyes focused on his wife in the back of the room, who

beamed at him. "I come to you without any pointless excuses. There was no excusing my behavior. But can you find it in your hearts to forgive me?"<p>

Snotlout slowly got to his feet, looking his chief directly in the eye. "We promised to stand by you until the end. We're not letting you go that easily."

"Yeah. And besides, if you stopped being chief, Snotlout would have to take over." Tuffnut added with a smirk. "And he hasn't done any of the awesome things you've done."

As Snotlout hastily retorted, Hiccup's eyes scanned the crowd. His friends all looked at him with a renewed resolve to stand by him no matter what. But several others weren't as forgiving. He watched as a small group of people left the Great Hall, not bothering to keep their footsteps silent. He sighed to himself. It was up to him to make it up to them one by one.

His disappointment lasted only moments. He soon felt two pairs of arms around his waist as his children came up to the platform to express their forgiveness. Ruffnut punched him in the shoulder but her smile assured him that it wasn't meant to be malicious. Heather gave him a quick, one armed hug as her husband clapped him on the back.

But it was Olaf Larson's words that ended up meaning the most to him long after that night was over. He wheeled over and reached up to shake Hiccup's hand.

"I don't think I've ever heard a better apology." he said cheerfully. "I don't need to do any more than look at the way you embrace your children and your wife to know that we have our old chief back. You will lead us well."

"Thank you, Olaf." Hiccup's smile widened. "You don't know how much your forgiveness means to me."

"As a man who has made many mistakes, I assure you that I do." Olaf chuckled. "Welcome home, chief."

"Thank you." Hiccup said, looking out at the crowd of people who had forgiven him and at his family, who all looked at him lovingly. "It's good to be back."

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>No! Please, I'm sorry! I'll go back and get what you want! But you didn'tâ€¦| " Finn dodged the cane, skidding across the wood on his stomach, vaguely aware of the glass shards underneath his bare skin. "You didn't specify what to buy! Please don't hurt me!" Finn begged, curling into a fetal position with his arms covering his head.<em>

\_Ratri raised the cane, a horrible glint in his eyes, and brought it down.\_

Finn awoke with a gasp, his body covered in sweat and his heart pounding in his ears. He trembled for a moment, forgetting that he was no longer on Maero and that Ratri was far away. That Ratri could



never hurt him again.

For a moment, the boy considered going into his parents' room and asking if he could crawl into bed with them. He knew that their warmth would make him feel safe, would comfort him. But he wasn't Adrianna. He wasn't weak. And he wasn't going to cry about his fears or his nightmares the way everyone else did.

He crawled under his covers again and shut his eyes, willing his mind to go blank again. He wouldn't think about it. Maybe then the nightmares would cease.

\* \* \*

><p>"Up! Get up!"<p>

Astrid groaned, pulling the covers over her head. Her husband laughed, trying to tug them from her grip.

"No, come on." she moaned sleepily.

"Astrid, honey, you promised." Hiccup leaned down and kissed the top of her head, which was all that was visible thanks to the blankets.

"Okay, okay." Astrid tossed the covers off her head and captured Hiccup's lips with her own. "I'm up."

Hiccup skipped over to the dresser and pulled on his clothes as fast as he could. "Gods, we need to do this more often."

"Calm down or you'll wear yourself out before we wake up the kids!" Astrid laughed, now trying to get dressed as fast as him.

"Impossible." Hiccup grinned and threw open the door, taking a deep breath and enjoying the fresh morning air. "Addie! Finn! Wake up!"

Two doors opened a minute later as the twins hurriedly emerged and pounded down the stairs. The four Haddocks stopped on the last step, all feeling slightly sheepish. Benen was sitting at the table, an amused expression on his face.

"Quite the early risers, aren't you?" he asked with a grin. "It's been a long time since I've seen so much energy at the crack of dawn."

Hiccup looked over to the couch where the elderly man had slept and was relieved to note that it had been smoothed out, indicating that Benen had risen before him and his family.

"We're going flying!" Adrianna squealed.

"A good reason to rise early!" Benen chuckled. "I'll be going to give you four some time with each other. I should go looking for a place to stay." he sighed. "Goodness, it's been a long time since I had somewhere to call my own."

"Come by this evening and I'll help you move." Hiccup said. "But

first, you need to eat."

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly impose." Benen protested.

"Nonsense." Astrid reached into the cupboards to take out copious amounts of food. "You are no imposition."

Finn sat down and, once Astrid passed him a big bowl of berry porridge, scooped a generous amount into his mentor's bowl. Adrianna did the same with the scrambled eggs her mother passed her.

"Why, there's enough on my plate to feed a small army!" Benen exclaimed, pushing the plate forward. "I couldn't-"

"You are going to eat all of that." Astrid insisted. "And you're going to keep eating until Finn won't risk getting a parchment cut if he gives you a hug."

"But-"

"No arguments!" Hiccup said, pushing the plate toward the former slave.

Benen looked down at his plate and then back at Astrid, who had just sat down and was passing the food around the table. Tears filled his eyes.

"Oh Benen, don't cry." Adrianna whimpered, reaching across the table (nearly putting her elbow in the bowl of porridge as she did so) to wipe the man's tears.

"I'm sorry." Benen wept, smiling through his tears at the Haddock girl's kindness. "I don't mean to upset you. But no one has treated me this way in a very long time."

"Get used to it, Benen." Hiccup placed a hand on the man's wrist. "Berk is going to love you. I can promise that."

When breakfast had ended (Benen easily ate everything on his plate and even accepted seconds at Astrid's insistence), the family made their way to a nearby cliff, dragons at their heels, while Benen made his way to the village. Hiccup looked up at the almost completely clear sky and felt something he hadn't felt in a very long time: excitement.

"All right, Addie," he said, turning to his daughter, "give me your hand and I'll hoist you onto Toothless here."

Adrianna looked at the Night Fury with a furrowed brow before turning to her father. "Daddy, I love you very, very much... but can I ride with mommy today?"

"Well," Hiccup turned to his wife, who looked so touched she might actually shed a tear, "who am I to keep a girl from her mother?" he turned to Finn. "I guess that leaves you with me, buddy. What do you say? Want to show the girls who rules the skies?"

Finn opened his mouth to respond when suddenly a large bag dropped to the ground right in front of his father. Hiccup bent over and picked it up, eyebrow raised, as Pipsqueak landed on his shoulder.

"What's that?" Adrianna asked, making herself comfortable atop Stormfly.

"It looks like..." Hiccup opened the bag. "It is! Oh good girl, Pipsqueak!"

"It is what?" Astrid raised an eyebrow.

"It's the bag of money I used to pay Ratri." Hiccup let out a shout of laughter. "Pipsqueak must have thought we left it behind by accident!"

"You mean you got Benen and me for \_free\_?" Finn's mouth split into a wide smile. "Ratri must be \_so\_ mad!"

"I bet he is!" Hiccup wiped tears of mirth out of his eyes. "No slaves and no money. I wish I could see his face."

The Haddocks laughed, quite pleased that the cruel man had gotten at least a little bit of what he deserved. Finn looked up and thanked the gods that Ratri wouldn't be able to purchase any more slaves for the time being.

"Well, Adri," Astrid climbed onto Stormfly behind her daughter. "Ready to show the boys what we're made of?"

Adrianna nodded eagerly. They waited for Hiccup to mount Toothless before shooting like an arrow into the sky. As they flew, the Haddock family all breathed deeply, enjoying the crisp morning air and the view of their island growing smaller and smaller as they flew closer to the clouds.

Astrid put her arms around her daughter. True, she and Adrianna still didn't have as much in common as they might have liked but all the tension was gone. The female Haddocks felt like they had found all the common ground they needed. Adrianna was excited to learn everything her mother had to teach her. And, though she didn't know it, Astrid was just as excited to teach her as she was to learn from her. The little girl had already taught her mother so many important lessons. Almost as many as her mother had taught her. And that was only the beginning.

Hiccup felt his son lean back into his chest as the Night Fury flew higher into the sky. He still felt guilty for treating his little man as horribly as he had over the last few months. He hoped that Finn would continue to allow him to make it up to him. He didn't know it, but Finn prayed that he could stay close to his father for the rest of his life. The boy knew that there was so much left to learn. And that he and Hiccup would learn it all together.

And so the Haddocks, all feeling like their hearts were bursting with excitement and love for each other, ascended into the clouds. They didn't notice, but an old man watched them until they disappeared, thanking the gods for each and every one of them.

\* \* \*

><p><em>This is Berk.<em>

\_It's the kind of place that looks peaceful all the time. Sure, we have our spats, but at the end of the day, our anger dissipates and we all go to bed in good spirits.\_

\_That being said, sometimes our darkest thoughts and feelings can become stowaways in our minds. We may go about life not knowing that they're there but they always turn up sooner or later. And when they take over and turn us into the people we detest, it may be too late to change things.\_

\_But what can we do when these mental and emotional stowaways come seemingly out of nowhere and wreak havoc on our lives? How can we deal with them when they turn up in ourselves or in the ones we love?\_

\_There is only one cure, and that is forgiveness. Only then can we address the problems and attempt to move on.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>THE END<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><em>Wow, what a ride! This story was intense, difficult to write, and a lot of fun! There were times when I wanted to throw my computer out the window out of frustration but I stuck with it and actually managed to finish it! What a surprise!<em>

\_I feel like this final chapter was terrible but I have a feeling I'm the only one who will think so. You all tend to like what I consider my own mediocre work. Maybe I need to stop being so critical.\_

\_The next story is called \_\_Taming Hearts\_\_, as you all know, and it will be up soon. I can't say exactly when because I may need a short break from writing but I can assure you that I won't make you wait too long. There's a bit of fine tuning that needs to be done but it's basically planned out fairly well.\_

\_This story had a lot of help so let me credit everyone individually:\_

\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_: You have, as always, been my biggest supporter and the best junior writer anyone could ever ask for! Folks, she's amazing, she encouraged me when I was down, gave me ideas when I was feeling a bit dry, and wrote sections when I simply couldn't find the words. Thank you for everything and I can't wait to work alongside you in \_\_Taming Hearts\_\_!\_

\_\*\*Fritz96\*\*\_\_: Your editing has been valuable and some of your observations have improved this story very much! I thank you for all your assistance and hope you're willing to continue to help out in the next story and beyond!\_

\_\*\*httydfan1991\*\*\_\_: Thank you for the late night conversations and for proofreading! Thanks for being the one who gave me the idea to nearly break up Hiccstrid (even though you'd rather not take credit for that) because it got everyone emotionally invested and made them love the previous chapter even more because of the reunion! I hope you'll continue to read and occasionally proofread the many sequels I

have planned!\_

\_\_\*\*amyboomerang\*\*\_\_: In addition to being my best friend in real life, you are one of the best people to come to when I need a bit of help with ideas. Considering the fact that you actually came up with the idea for this entire story and the title of the next one, you have offered a lot more than most readers and helpers! Your assistance is greatly appreciated and I hope you'll continue to help out!\_

\_Also a big thank you to the people I may have sent things for approval or have used ideas from: \_\_\*\*nedandchuck\*\*\_\_, \_\_\*\*animationrulezz\*\*\_\_, \_\_\*\*imaginationflies\*\*\_\_, and \_\_\*\*HeatherTheMagnificent\*\*\_\_.\_

\_Let me know what you thought of this chapter and of the whole story! Now's the time for the comprehensive review and feel free to make it as long and detailed as you want! I hope you liked it!\_

\_See you in \_\_Taming Hearts\_\_!\_

\_~KateMarie999\_

## 19. Extras!

\_Okay, I lied. There was a really big deleted scene. But I noticed not many people were commenting on the extra chapters in the previous stories so I mistakenly thought no one cared. But several people asked for this extra section or simply expressed disappointment that it wasn't coming so I changed my mind.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Stoick's Cameo<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><em>As you can probably guess, my original ending for the dream was to have Stoick show up at the end. But as I was writing it with <em>\_\_\*\*EmmerzK\*\*\_\_, it just didn't click. It's funny because I'd had it planned since the very beginning but ending up cutting it right before posting the chapter. But I wrote a good chunk of it so I thought I'd post it. The last bit will be put in script format because all that was written was the dialogue, with descriptions and padding to be added later. So without further ado, Stoick!\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Stoick Cameo Version 1<strong>\_

\* \* \*

><p>"I'll make it right." he wept. "Please... please give me another chance."<p>

A hand suddenly rested on his shoulder. "You already have one."

Hiccup flinched. He knew that voice. But it was impossible... wasn't

it? He turned around and was greeted with a sight he had not seen in far too long.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "Dad?"

Quivering in fear, Hiccup stared up at his father. His heart seemed to slam against his ribcage with every beat, his breathing erratic and short. The tears streamed down his face as he struggled to back away from the towering figure, terrified of what might happen if he tried to touch him. Would his father appear real just for some apparition of Dagur to rise from the ashes and strike him down before his eyes? He could feel his sanity slipping away just like the tears from his eyes, the sobs of a broken man pouring from his soul. He couldn't watch another loved one die—he \_couldn't\_.

Stoick held out a hand to him and gently slid to his knees, his fingers a foot away from his son's shoulder. "Son, it's all right. It's not real. It's me."

Hiccup's eyes darted from the large hand to dull blue eyes. He found his voice after a few silent moments. "Th-they're dead— all b-because of me—"

"No," Stoick smiled gently and held his position. "They're not. Just trust me; everything is all right. Come here."

Hiccup looked around with darting eyes, still waiting for something to happen. He looked up as if waiting for a wall of rock to fall upon his father. But nothing happened. He could see the loving smile, gentle, kind, strong. He felt small; he felt helpless; he felt like a small boy again needing to be held by his daddy. Hiccup reached out a violently shaking hand and gasped when his father's vast hand enveloped his. With a choking sob, Hiccup took his chance to lunge forward and wrap his arms around his father before he could disappear with everyone else he truly loved. Stoick's arms surrounded him in an embrace warm and tight that reminded him of his childhood. His red, braided beard still felt scratchy against his skin, his muscles still bulged around his thin frame, and he still smelled of pine and sweat. This was his father; he was real.

"How can I be all right?" Hiccup whimpered. "They're gone. Everyone I ever loved."

"Hiccup, listen to me." Stoick gently grasped his son's shoulders and held him out so they could be eye to eye. "This isn't real. None of this."

Doubt clouded Hiccup's eyes and his body tensed. "I watched everything. I saw the blood, heard the screams, watched the life leave their eyes..." his voice rose a notch as he added shakily, "And you're telling me it wasn't real?"

"Not one moment." Stoick assured him in a soft voice. "Hiccup, think about it. While your mind's clear. It's quiet. The damage is done. There's nothing you can do except think." Stoick squeezed his shoulders. "So \_think\_."

Hiccup swallowed deeply, his heart pumping uncomfortably in his chest. He looked down at his father's armored tunic, trying to think about... anything other than the madness that continually tried to

drag him to the Well of Insanity. He thought of Astrid, his beautiful Astrid who would normally never think to hurt herself intentionally... and he thought of his two beautiful, innocent children who loved to live and laugh in their own happy ways. He even thought of his best friend, Toothless who had taught him more about himself than about dragons, not to mention how to fight and protect himself... his eyes flew open before he even realized they had slipped to a close. Reality washed over him like a warm spring in the mountains.

His eyes snapped to his father's and a look of pure epiphany washed over him. "It wasn't real..." Stoick shook his head steadily, and Hiccup took his silence to voice his next thought. "I killed Dagur... I won."

"Yes you did."

"But why? Why would I have to watch that?" Hiccup sniffled and brushed more tears out of his eyes.

"Because," Stoick began carefully but not without a small stern expression. "You are beating yourself down to the point of insanity because of your guilt, and you are dragging everyone else down with you. This..." Stoick gestured his arm in a wide arc to their surroundings. "This is what would've happened if you hadn't won."

"I... I'm a killer..."

"No, Hiccup. You're a hero. We can't always protect the ones we love the way we want." Stoick looked him directly in the eye. "But it's your job to keep them safe. No matter what it takes."

"Dad, I took a life-"

"Look what he would have done if you hadn't." Stoick again waved his hand vaguely towards the foggy expanse around them. "Finn beaten until he was nothing, sweet Adrianna used and abused just because she's pretty and unable to defend herself. Astrid forced to spend every night with that monster and unable to get away or get help. Your best friend's skull hanging over them while Dagur does whatever he wants-"

"Stop!" Hiccup cried, squeezing his eyes shut. "Please stop."

"My point exactly. It wasn't enough just to tell you what would have happened. You had to see it."

Hiccup slowly opened his eyes to look at him again, knowing any arguments would be futile. He had been as bull-headed as a man could possibly get and then some...

He released his father's shoulders and buried his face in his hands for a moment with a heavy, shaky sigh. "I'm a fool."

"You're not a fool." Stoick said gently, patting his son's shoulder. "You're someone who values life. That's a strength. But you were forced to make a choice. And you made the right one. Even if it went against everything you stood for."

"If it was so right, the why does it tear me apart every night? I can't look myself in the mirror, let alone look anyone in the eye."

"Hiccup... if it had been your daughter who had to make this choice instead of you, would you condemn her the way you condemn yourself? Because you're right. She's not a killer. And, trust me, she never will be." Stoick sighed deeply. "But pretend that she did this. What would you tell her?"

Hiccup paused thoughtfully. "I'd tell her about the options, that she has to choose the lesser of two evils. It won't be easy but at the end of the day..." he stopped, swallowed and continued in a softer voice. "You have to do what's right by those you love... no matter the cost."

"Then why won't you take your own advice?" Stoick asked. "Why won't you let this go and enjoy the time you have with the people you saved? Your children will grow up before you know it."

"But they... how can I be their hero if I've done something so... \_heinous\_?"

"How many heinous things has Dagur done? And does he have any remorse?" Stoick smiled and gently poked Hiccup in the chest. "You're a hero because you have values. Because you only go against them when there is no other choice."

Hiccup rubbed his forehead, trying to relieve the throbbing. He had to think: would he really to back in time and give Dagur a chance to live? Would he rather die instead? Leave his family to... \_that\_ future? \_What\_ future? All it was was pain and abuse and mockery... and it wasn't just his family, it was his friends... his eyes suddenly widened. Gobber, Snotlout, Fishlegs, the Thorston twins... they sacrificed themselves, died at the hands of the Berserkers. They left children motherless and fatherless in the attempt to preserve Berk and the Haddock heritage. They had been afraid in their lack of support... but they weren't unfaithful or disloyal. In fact, they were as close to loyal as loyalty could come.

Understanding clicked in his mind and a heavy weight suddenly lifted from his shoulders. He felt his eyes focus and his muscles relax... it was worth it. Killing a man was the most horrible, flagitious thing he had ever done. But if it meant his village was safe from the bonds of a terrible clan, it was worth it. If it saved his precious little boy and girl from the world's most disgusting forms of abuse, it was worth it. If it saved Astrid from Dagur's constant torture through physical and emotional abuse, even preserving her from watching her own children die before her eyes and becoming a murderer herself... without a shadow of a doubt, it was worth it.

**\*\*Stoick: \*\***Forgive yourself. And... one day, when one of your children does something that flies in the face of everything you've ever taught them, forgive them too.

**\*\*Hiccup:\*\*** Do you know something I don't?

**\*\*Stoick:\*\*** Well when you die, you get to see the full picture. How everything connects. And the reason for some of the worst pain. And I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that it will be worth it one



day. And you wouldn't trade those experiences for anything.

**Hiccup:** **Including this?**

**Stoick:** **This is one of the most important things you have ever done. You just don't know it yet. And don't concern yourself trying to figure it out. Give it time.**

Hiccup huffed, wiping his face down with his palms. "Gods, they've been trying to tell me for weeks, and I didn't listen-"

Stoick breathed a laugh. "You're listening now."

"I always did do things the hard way..."

"Yes... yes you did." Stoick squeezed Hiccup's shoulder. "But it's not too late to put things right."

**Hiccup:** **I don't know, at this rate everyone is ready to tie me to a mast and ship me off for good. Especially Astrid.**

**Stoick:** **Give her some credit.**

**Hiccup:** **Have you been listening to our fights? My behavior isn't exactly commendable...**

**Stoick:** **Neither is hers.**

**Hiccup:** **But I'm the husband. And the chief so I've got double the responsibility.**

**Stoick:** **So you're not allowed to make mistakes?**

**Hiccup:** **No, but that doesn't make it okay.**

**Stoick:** **That's where forgiveness comes in.**

**Hiccup:** **What I did was unforgivable.**

**Stoick:** **Hiccup-**

**Hiccup:** **I got a divorce, dad! I wanted to rip apart my marriage and I didn't even care!**

**Stoick:** **You didn't get a divorce. (Hiccup pauses, confused) She never turned the papers in. As I said before, give her some credit. Don't get ahead of yourself.**

**Hiccup:** **So... what's she waiting for?**

**Stoick:** **You.**

**Hiccup:** **What do you mean?**

**Stoick:** **She knows deep down that you, the real you, is buried deep inside, trying to claw his way out. Nice he's finally emerged she's going to be right there on the surface waiting.**

**Hiccup:** **Not one of your better analogies...**

\* \* \*

><p><em><em>And that's where it ended. Something about it didn't click so I decided to scrap the whole thing. That's about all I have as far as extra scenes. Sorry this is lame. But there is good news! <em>\_\_\_Taming Hearts\_\_\_ is up! So go right on over to my profile, if you haven't already, and follow/favorite! And review too!\_\_\_

\_\_\_And speaking of review, you know what to do! Hope you liked this random extra scene. Think I should have gone with it?\_\_\_

\_\_\_~KateMarie999\_\_\_

End  
file.